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# Our Sacrifice Shall Not Be Required: Examining Maternal Ambivalence and Refusal in Black Motherhood

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OUR SACRIFICE SHALL NOT BE REQUIRED:  
EXAMINING MATERNAL AMBIVALENCE AND REFUSAL IN BLACK MOTHERHOOD

by

CANDICE J. MERRITT

Under the Direction of Tiffany King, PhD

ABSTRACT

This thesis articulates motherhood as both a liberal and black humanist formation that conditions black women to mother and attempts to untether maternity from the black female body. By centering maternal ambivalence—the desire and distaste for motherhood—in selected works by black women, this thesis argues that black motherhood is an ambivalent site for some black women. Motherhood can be a site of joy and displeasure; sacrifice and refusal; life and death.

INDEX WORDS: Black Motherhood, Maternal Ambivalence, Black Feminism

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by

Candice J. Merritt

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

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Georgia State University

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2018

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Examining Maternal Ambivalence and Refusal in Black Motherhood

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May 2018

**DEDICATION**

To My Self—the  
Mother and Daughter—  
I Am,  
Try-ing to Save.

## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

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## 1 INTRODUCTION

### THE SEARCH FOR BLACK MATERNAL AMBIVALENCE AND CLAIMING BLACK FEMALE MONSTROSITY

More than a decade ago, I left my home and child in the Midwest to attend a private university in the South. I took guilt and resentment with me—but, mainly guilt. Although my own mother encouraged me to go anywhere for school while she and my father agreed to take care of my child, I never really forgave myself for my absence. It was even harder to forgive myself for having the desire to leave in the first place. What kind of black mother would leave her child, especially when given the option to stay and raise her family with the support of loved ones? The question raked me. That desire for leaving home felt illicit. That desire meant leaving the child and forgoing the possibility of becoming an enduring black mother who worked hard to support herself and her family. In more personal terms, it meant not becoming the maternal figure that my mother came to function and represent in my lifetime—a black mother who is a pinnacle of strength and self-sacrifice. Naturally, guilt tucked away my desire inside my throat; my tongue struggled to admit its existence. I still attended school like I wanted. But, when someone would ask after knowing that I had a small child back home, the only verbal admissions that felt socially permissive were, “Yes, I miss home” and “Yes, I do miss my son very much.” But, I knew inside I felt otherwise.

The desire for leaving became less forbidden after sharing with a white feminist professor that I struggled with feelings around being a mother away from home. She recommended that I read works by Adrienne Rich and Anne Lamont. I got my hands on a copy of Adrienne Rich’s *Of Woman Born*. I read the introduction and her chapter on *Tenderness and Anger*. In that

moment, I felt the meaning of the word groundbreaking. I had found diary entries much like my own. Select excerpts reminded me of my personal corpus of pages filled with unspeakable words about being a mother buried away in old shoeboxes in my closet. Those pages were meant for my eyes, and my eyes only. Yet, Rich openly shared hers which were joined by powerful reflections such as:

Unexamined assumptions: First, that a “natural” mother is a person without further identity, one who can find her chief gratification in being all day with small children, living at a pace tuned to theirs; that the isolation of mothers and children together in the home must be taken for granted; that maternal love is, and should be, quite literally selfless; that children and mothers are the “causes” of each others’ suffering. I was haunted by the stereotype of the mother whose love is “unconditional”; and by the visual and literary images of motherhood as a single-minded identity. If I knew parts of myself existed that would never cohere to those images, weren’t those parts then abnormal, monstrous? (22-23)

I had always felt like an unforgivable creature for not wanting to mother. I certainly wanted my son to be taken care of and to be happy, but I had never really wanted to be *mother*—the all sacrificing and nourishing figure my mother tried to groom me to become. I have often attributed my maternal aberration to becoming pregnant at a young age. Yet, Rich struggled with her maternal ambivalence—her love and her hate of mothering—as a married, adult woman living in a middle-class neighborhood in Northeastern United States. She even had hired help. By normative cultural standards, she followed the correct script. I was the one who strayed the path and, as a result, suffered from abhorrent thoughts and feelings. Reading Rich’s personal and theoretical writings, however, showed me that my maternal feelings did not occur in a social

vacuum. My desires for wanting more than motherhood felt connected to other mothers, and a whole book existed with a mother writing from her personal *I* perspective while also discussing history and political ideologies surrounding gender and sexuality. The publication felt sacred. Yet, deep down I still wished that the mother who wrote those words were of a darker complexion. I yearned for my mother's voice, her own history, and writings. I also yearned for my own.

As I have envisioned and cultivated this project over the last several years, I have searched for the black woman's equivalent to Adrienne Rich's *Of Woman Born*. A black mother's oeuvre on maternal ambivalence in the form of collected essays has still felt personally necessary. My yearning for the form, however, has only provided me with a dearth of results—a large gap, in fact. I have gone through a number of black women's writings collections: *The Black Woman: An Anthology*, *All the Women are White, All the Men are Black, But Some of Us Are Brave*, *In Search of Our Mothers' Garden*, *Double Stitch: Black Women Write on Mothers and Daughters*, *Flat Footed Truths: Telling Black Women's Lives*, *Words of Fire*, *Still Brave: The Evolution of Black Women's Studies*, *Black Motherhood(s): Contours, Contexts and Considerations*, *Life Notes: Personal Writings by Contemporary Black Women*, and *Revolutionary Mothering: Love on the Front Lines*. Essays predominate these notable collections, but rarely do they feature a black woman writing from the perspective of a black mother who expresses maternal desires away from family and child(ren) nor a concrete experience-driven personal essay that problematize assumptions that desire motherhood altogether for black women.

I turned to black feminist theoretical works, hoping to find “true” sociological and historic accounts of black mothers who felt ambivalent about motherhood and for those who had

left their families. Prominent works that delve into black women's history of work, reproduction, family dynamics, and activism, such as bell hooks' *From Margin to Center* and *Yearning: Race, Gender, and Cultural Politics*, Patricia Hill Collins' *Black Feminist Thought*, and Dorothy Roberts' *Killing the Black Body*, stressed the struggles and commitment of black mothers to their families and communities often in the face of extraordinary odds. Motherhood as an institution and the labor of mothering blood and fictive kin were cherished traditions for black women. In fact, many theorists called for honoring black maternal sacrifice, especially given how history dating from the period of enslavement through the contemporary era of neoliberal welfare reform have exploited, devalued, and/or outright assaulted black motherhood. Such sociopolitical conditions have created inequitable circumstances that have kept black women from fulfilling their maternal roles. The black feminist theorists I read emphasized the external severances to the maternal bond between black women and children and celebrated black women who chose and were able to keep families together. Reading through these volumes, I found stories and voices of mothers like my own—devoted and deserving women who prioritized strength, endurance, sacrifice, and survival. They were “good” women—not the “bad” ones who expressed wanting out of maternal and familial bonds. Collectively, these works were not interested in my desire to explore the “abnormal, monstrous” interiority that mothers have felt nor the expressions of those who left the child(ren) (Rich 23).

The historic devaluation of black motherhood partially accounts for black feminist theorists' defense of black mothers as deserving and devoted family women. Yet, I sense that ambivalent maternal figures ranging from mothers like Toni Morrison's Sethe, Pearl Cleage's Alice, Adrienne Rich during the 1950s, to mothers who have lacked desire to rear, like myself, at the beginning of the new millennium, present too taboo a subject for black feminists and

theorists to confront. Anger, resentment, and/or the lack of desire toward mothering are pathological affects in the bodies of mothers in general. Much like the Madonna/Whore dichotomy that sorts women into a good/bad binary, cultural ideologies of mothering sort mothers along affective and moral lines. Cultural dictates expect all mothers across racial and class lines to “...love their children no matter what and to willingly sacrifice for their offspring” (Beaulieu 142). And although maternal ambivalence, or what psychotherapist Roszika Parker (1995) defines as loving and hating feelings all mothers experience toward their children, is understood to be a ubiquitous experience by psychologists, cultural mores say otherwise. Mothers who express negative feelings or acts towards children are “considered monstrous—immoral, unnatural, and evil” (Almond xx). Such women are the *whorish/horrific* lot of “bad” women/mothers people castigate and many women seek to avoid.

As I have been interested in the voice of ambivalent black mothers and mothers who have opted out of the mother-child bond, I find the metaphor of monstrosity to be profound. Monsters provoke disgust, rage, and fear. They represent difference—an otherness that we would rather repress, deny, and/or kill. Mothers who fail to love (in the expected sense) or leave their family are cultural monsters; they are “...not only unnatural, but...immoral. They are mothers in the sense that they have given birth, but are *non-mothers* in terms of social understandings and normative ideals of what a ‘proper’ mother should be” (Pavlovic, Mullender, and Aris 253, my emphasis). The metaphor gives language to the feelings and experience I dare not speak prior to this project and provides a queer entry point to think through the unnatural and immoral designations of black motherhood beyond interpretive frames that consider the qualities as pathological or untrue. Monsters are non-normative creatures—they can tell us a thing or two about ourselves and our world. The non-mother, the absent mother, and the abandoning mother

are perverse cultural figures that I want to embrace, which requires confronting narratives whose truth may strike fear and pain in our very bones. In doing so, this thesis diverges from many black feminist projects on motherhood that have spent a great deal of energy talking back to the damaging designation of black women as “bad mothers” or “unfit mothers” in the larger public sphere. Instead, this project focuses on works that present black mothers who express wanting out of what I refer to as “maternal imperatives”—the social expectations that require black women to always be emotionally available, nourishing, and self-sacrificing towards family and community—and works that fundamentally problematize the primacy of the institution of motherhood in the lives of black women.

### **Pushing with Spillers and Thinking with Sapphire**

Working with the metaphor of monstrosity requires an uncomfortable confrontation with history. Speaking of black mothers as monstrous is a politically dangerous act given that white supremacist logic once considered folks in my lineage non-human and legal property. The institution of slavery once barred black women from the legal right to claim their biological children. The historic archive has detailed the stories of the gross injustice of black maternal separation: children torn from breasts of mothers on the auction block; black mothers’ breasts suckled by white children—her teat rarely to nurture her own; mothers losing their children because of an owner’s bad debt, will, or collateral for mortgage; mothers pleading on their knees to her owner to keep at least one child, then only to be met with a beating; mothers whose stomachs were cut open to have the fetus fall to the ground, then stomped to death; mothers losing newborns in a makeshift trough while they labored in the field after a sudden, deadly storm. The stories go on. I do not know all of them; and the ones I do know I cannot write because there are so many. Death and loss fill the historic archive of black motherhood and form

an immense psychic weight in my project. Stolen bodies, torn flesh, the loss of language and land, the disregard and breaking of kinship between slave communities beginning with the slave trade itself are all historic traumas and specters hanging over my own body, my research, and my writing. The haunting of this history makes it difficult to talk about black mothers as monsters and the desire to refuse maternal expectations. I fear censure that I would even suggest that black feminists should rethink the role of the maternal for black women since it was (and arguably still is today) a feminine and human expression that all black women cannot fully achieve due to circumstances of exploitation. Further, the labor of mothering has sustained black men, women, and children through history. This knowledge is a historic and personal wound that I carry.

Pushing through the psychic weight of history, I have found direction for thinking about black maternal monstrosity, ambivalence, and absence in the scholarship of literary critic Hortense Spillers. The experimental academic essay, "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book" (1987) provides me with the theoretical language to discuss the historic racial and sexual formations that have negatively impacted black women's reproductive capacities in the United States and a reading strategy of black motherhood that does not privilege liberal redress or sentiment. I argue that Spillers reckons with the fleshy traumas of liberal exclusion from the human category. She, however, does not advocate for black women and feminists to assimilate to western paradigms of gender and sexuality. She does not call for black women to become the prized woman and mother of liberal humanism. I contend that Spillers points to the potentials of thinking of black female subjectivity that is bound to the liberal tradition of woman/mother which informs my desire to untether the foundations of liberalism from the black female body.

“Mamas Baby, Papa’s Maybe” intervenes in the fields of literary criticism, black studies and feminism by articulating the racial and gender interstices of the Transatlantic Slave Trade and American chattel slavery. In a roundtable discussion about her now formative essay, Spillers expressed that at the time of writing, she was trying to address the issue of theoretical absence of black women within scholarship. She shares:

*...All the Blacks Are Men, All the Women are White, but Some of Us Are Brave ...* was the situation that I was trying to describe. Conceptually and theoretically...I had an urge to find a category that respected history. I wrote it...with a need to tell something that had been told over and over again...But what was new was that I was trying to bring the language of a postmodern academy to a very old problem...that historians had been writing about for at least fifty years at the time that I was writing this piece. (Spillers, Hartman, Griffin, Eversley, and Morgan 308)

Through re-reading slave codes, slave narratives, and historic studies, Spillers revisits the moments that begin what critical race scholars today consider the discursive formations that commenced the physical and social death of black life and the essay showcases the critical position of black female bodies in the making and maintenance of the “larger order of naming” in the American nation-state (Spillers, Hartman, Griffin, Eversley, and Morgan 303). Spillers recounts how chattel slavery denied captive persons the category of liberal humanity; slaves could be neither man, nor woman, nor could they marry and arrange themselves into families. Slave code law ensured the arrangement. The juridical regime of slavery designated slaves as property and treated black beings like a bestial lot. In this political and economic formation, fatherhood and motherhood were an impossibility for black communities. The offspring of black female slaves did not belong to the biological mother of the child nor did it take the name of the



father. By law, the offspring followed the status of its mother. One could call the practice a kind of orphaning of slaves. As a result, “genetic reproduction,” Spillers states, “becomes, then, not an elaboration of the life-principle in its cultural overlap, but an extension of the boundaries of proliferating properties” (75). In this sense, motherhood loses its consecration as “female blood-rite/right” and does not apply to slave populations as female slaves were the breeders of property (75). The process of dehumanization, thus, meant a “*loss of gender*” for black female slaves (77).

By focusing on the problematics of the position of African female captives and slaves during these historic formations, Spillers, in the end, reveals a black female subject outside of traditional patriarchal gender parameters, or the liberal human category of woman. Though ungendered, this female social subject still constituted a necessary body for perpetuating white supremacy, patriarchy, and property relations through her capacity to reproduce slave populations, or what the law determined as, more property. After recounting the specific problematics and injuries to black female slaves, Spillers concludes with the following:

This problematizing of gender places her, in my view, *out of* the traditional symbolics of female gender, and it is our task to make a place for this different social subject. In doing so, we are less interested in joining the ranks of gendered femaleness than gaining the *insurgent* ground as female social subject.

Actually *claiming* the monstrosity (of a female with the potential to “name”), which her culture imposes in blindness, “Sapphire” might rewrite after all a radically different text for a female empowerment. (80)

Revisiting the traumas of American history are heavy. Returning to the genealogy of black women’s reproductive history pained Spillers at the time of working on her project. She

writes, “I was on the verge of crying what I was writing about” (Spillers, Hartman, Griffin, Eversley, and Morgan 308). My heart, too, fills with sadness and anger while reading Spillers’ narration of the dehumanization and dispossession of black life. Spillers’ project, however, creates an opening for me to push through the historic and psychic weight of slavery and carves out the possibility of imagining new ways of relating to self and caring for one another. A wound can be a kind of opening in the body associated with tearing or a breaking in tissue, in skin. You could say Spillers creates a figurative wound then, but this figurative wound has transformative potential, or *insurgent* possibilities, as Spillers may say. Instead of reading a liberal sentiment onto the wounds of enslavement, Spillers problematizes the assumed ideal human practices of marriage and family—institutions that were denied to captive communities. Spillers’ criticism of the liberal order of gender and sexuality suggests that she does not desire black female subjects to be enveloped by the project of liberal humanism. Notions of black liberation and freedom should not necessarily aspire toward the very liberal forms that captives were once legally barred from recognition and participation. For example, on the matter of family practices in the west, Spillers states:

...that “Family,” as we practice and understand it “in the West”—the vertical transfer of a bloodline, of a patronymic, of titles and entitlements, of real estate and the prerogatives of “cold cash,” from *fathers* to *sons* and in the supposedly free exchange of affectional ties between a male and a female of *his* choice—becomes the mythically revered privilege of a free and freed community. (74)

Spillers’ remarks connect the ideal family form in the U.S. to capitalism and heteropatriarchal affairs. Importantly, Spillers does not desire slave communities’ participation in this scheme of freedom. Instead she recognizes that, in spite of the forced dispersal of captive

communities brought on by the trade and enslavement, black communities continued to create meaningful connections and bonds that may have been illegible for those that want to “read this tale liberally” (75). For me, Spillers’ reading frees black life from proscriptions of heterosexuality and nuclear family formations—black life does not have to conform to traditional gender and sexual scripts. Black beings do not have to play man or woman who must marry to become husband and wife, and who then sexually mingle to make “the Family” of mother and father. Black communities have in the past and can continue to create other self-definitions and practices of care. Consequently, black women do not have to be the revered mother/woman in dominant imaginations. Black women and mothers do not have to sacrifice themselves for others—our sacrifice shall not be required.

Spillers’ ending serves as my beginning to this project. Spillers writes that “...the African-American female’s historic claim to the territory of womanhood and ‘femininity’ still tends to rest too solidly on the subtle and shifting calibrations of a liberal ideology” and that the “gendered female *exists for* the male” (77). Spillers seeks a social subject outside liberal categories for black women. She gestures toward Sapphire—a monstrous figure, a non-normative being—that fails to conform to preferred patriarchal and white supremacist imaginings of ideal femininity. Moving towards Sapphire provides a partial road map to a black female freedom not traditionally imagined. Like Spillers, I do not seek liberal redress nor make an appeal for black women to be included in the order of liberal humanity. I do not loudly contend “Ain’t I a Woman?” (hooks 1981) or “Ain’t I a Mommy?” (Philyaw 2016) like many other black feminists have rallied for. It is Sapphire that I seek to reclaim to embrace black maternal ambivalence and monstrosity.

Embedded within American cultural lexicon of black female stereotypes—the Mammy, the Matriarch, the Jezebel, and the Welfare Queen—stands Sapphire. Sapphire constitutes an emasculating black woman who eats her man, symbolically, of course. Cultural notions of black women as a strong, overbearing matriarch give Sapphire her contours. As one of the dominant “controlling images” of black womanhood, Patricia Hill Collins notes black scholars like W.E.B. Du Bois and E. Franklin Frazier along with prominent white men, like Daniel Patrick Moynihan, understood black women as matriarchs because of their significant roles in black family life (*Black Feminist Thought* 67). The matriarch, according to sexist and racist notions of femininity originating from slavery, was deemed unfeminine because she was the single woman/head of household and was “overly aggressive” toward men (*Black Feminist Thought* 74). Without proper participation in heteronormative and patriarchal familial arrangements, government officials and popular opinion by the late 1960s blamed the black matriarch for black poverty through her intergenerational transfer of bad values to her children. Sapphire sharpens the ideology of the matriarch by presenting black women as the “evil Black bitch” (Bambara 6). K. Sue Jewell in *From Mammy to Miss America and Beyond* describes that the “...fierce independence of mammy and the cantankerousness of Aunt Jemima, in conjunction with a proclivity for being loquacious, headstrong and omniscient, combine to make up Sapphire” (45). The most well-known image of the Sapphire stereotype originally debuted as a character in the American minstrelsy radio show *Amos N’ Andy* in the 1930s. *Amos N’ Andy* later became a popular television show and the character Sapphire Stevens, played by black actress Ernestine Wade, served as the “wisecracking, loud, hostile” wife of the character Kingfish (Reynolds-Dobbs, Thomas, and Harrison 138). Sapphire’s character “enjoyed making fun of Black men and often reinforced the stereotype of Black men being irresponsible and deceitful” (Reynolds-

Dobbs, Thomas, and Harrison 138). Today, she is a black woman marked by sass and “...is noted for telling people off, and spouting her opinion in an animated loud...intense expressiveness and hands-on-hip, finger pointing style” (Jewell 45). Sapphire in popular representations in film and television is often portrayed in comedic fashion. For this reason, Sapphire’s anger and feelings become minimized. As such, both black and white men “usually do not take Sapphire seriously and refer to her constant bossiness by saying, ‘You’re always running your mouth’” (Jewell 45).

The image of Sapphire has been used to quiet black women to submissive femininity and to prove “Black cultural deficiency” (Collins, “Black Feminist Thought” 75). Though the image is problematic, Sapphire could prove a useful reclamation for black feminist theorists. Sapphire operates as a figure of feminine lack and has the potential to rewrite heteropatriarchal scripts for women as she “enacts her ‘Old Man’ in drag” (Spillers 66). I am not imagining an asymmetrical sex/gender role reversal between black men and women—one that fantasizes female empowerment hinged upon the domination of the signs of woman over man. Rather I am imagining a possibility of black female empowerment rooted in a symbolic authority and material reality where black women can name themselves and determine their body and life on their own terms, and I am imagining the possibility of terms outside the liberal heteropatriarchal notion of black women and girls as the self-sacrificing, nourishing woman/mother. Spillers’ rhetorical move toward Sapphire points me to troubling, and what I consider, a more freeing kind of interrogative ground.

Thinking with Spillers, I am occupied with the following questions in my project: Perhaps it is okay for black women, like myself, to be a monster, a non-mother, a non-human being? What questions, stories, affects, and experiences about motherhood would black feminist

theorists ask, ruminate, and explore if they were to begin with Sapphire as an insurgent figure for black female empowerment? What if theorists listened to the Sapphire woman's language and expression regarding mothering? What information from her can feminists gain about black female being and the social world? With those questions in mind, Sapphire serves as my working figure of black maternal monstrosity for my project. For my purposes, Sapphire is a figure of maternal lack. She chooses not to nourish men. She is angry, a nasty woman. She fails to nurture children. She castigates them, neglects them; Sapphire is impatient, too unloving; she is anti-mammy, anti-mother. She is the monstrous non-mother in cultural imagining. Spillers' reclamation of Sapphire provides an opening for me to begin claiming black maternal monstrosity—a female social subject that fails to meet the maternal performance expected of black women.

## **1.1 Literature Review**

### ***1.1.1 Motherhood, Capitalism, and Patriarchy: Traditional Feminist Criticism***

Motherhood has been a topic of research across various academic disciplines ranging from anthropology, sociology, psychology, history, and literature. The growing body of feminist theory on motherhood also extensively drew upon interdisciplinary feminist analyses of sex/gender, patriarchy, and capitalism. In particular, white North American feminists in the academy have wrestled significantly with the topic. Adrienne Rich's *Of Woman Born* (1976) and Nancy Chodorow's *The Reproduction of Mothering* (1978) and *Feminism and Psychoanalytic Theory* (1989) set out key explanatory frameworks for motherhood and explored the social ramification of the idea of women as only mothers. These canonical feminist texts contend that motherhood is not a biologically determined category. By arguing against traditional biological, anthropological, and sociological theories that naturalized women's roles as mothers, feminists

introduced social constructivist, new psychoanalytic, and anthropological arguments to explain why women come to mother and men do not. These scholars separated the experience of motherhood from motherhood as an institution prescribed by patriarchal society and argued that the institution perpetuated the sexual division of labor and asymmetrical relationships between women and men.

In *Of Woman Born* (1976), Rich argues that patriarchy serves as the fundamental system that causes women's oppression and defines patriarchy as the:

...power of the fathers: a familial-social, ideological, political system in which men—by force, direct pressure, or through ritual, tradition, law, and language, customs, etiquette, education, and the division of labor, determine what part women shall or shall not play, and which the female is everywhere subsumed under the male. (57)

Rich understands motherhood as an invisible institution of patriarchy—one that is without a physical structure, but one that has a history and ideology that is bound within law, policy, and culture. She offers two definitions of motherhood. The first encompasses the "potential relationship of any woman to her powers of reproduction and to children" (13). The latter defines motherhood as an institution that "aims at ensuring that that potential—and all women—shall remain under male control" (13). Accordingly, the institution of motherhood expects women to be the exclusive caretakers of children. As such, the ideology reduces women's identities to that of mother. Rich describes the woman-mother identity as "beneficent, sacred, pure, asexual, nourishing; and the physical potential for motherhood...is her single destiny and justification in life" (34). Rich credits several influential radical feminist texts to her articulation of patriarchy and the mother-ideal. She names Kate Millet's *Sexual Politics* (1970) and its exclusive focus on the origin and workings of patriarchy as a fundamental and universal system of male domination

that lies at the core of the oppression of women. Rich also credits Mary Daly's *Beyond God the Father: Toward a Philosophy's of Women's Liberation* (1973) and body of work as essential to her criticism of patriarchy in its ideological relation to religion, philosophy, mythology, and psychology.

Similarly, Nancy Chodorow (1978) builds her psychological (psychoanalytic) theory of women's mothering based on a Freudian theory of sexuality and from a radical feminist understanding of patriarchy as a system based on a "social organization of gender" (8).

Chodorow argues that women's capacity for nurturance and mothering occurs within the context of a sex/gender system that deploys a sexual division of labor and an asymmetrical relationship of power between men and women. Chodorow extends upon feminist anthropologist Gayle Rubin's concept of a sex/gender system. Rubin herself argues that every society organizes itself by a:

sex/gender system—systematic ways to deal with sex, gender and babies...in a set of arrangements by which the biological raw material of human sex and procreation is shaped by human, social intervention and satisfied in a conventional manner...the realm of human sex, gender, and procreation has been subjected to, and changed by, relentless social activity for millennia. Sex as we know it—gender identity, sexual desire and fantasy, concepts of childhood—is a social product. (Rubin qtd in Chodorow 8)

Chodorow further argues that "every sex-gender system has organized society around two and only two genders, a sexual division of labor that always includes women's mothering, and heterosexual marriage" (9). Chodorow contends that kinship and familial arrangements are at the center of sex-gender systems and enable its reproduction of gender organization and sexuality (9). She further makes use of Michelle Rosald and Sherry Ortner's notion that all



societies have distinct public and private (domestic) spheres and that women's mothering serves the core of sex-gender systems and the reproduction of male dominance (9). Rosald and Ortner state that "mothers and children form the core of domestic organization" and the domestic relationships are assumed to be biologically determined (9). Men locate themselves in the public sphere that is defined by public institutions and is understood to be masculine. In the public/private arrangement, the public dictates the private and men own the political power "to create and enforce institutions of social and political control" which include the control of marriage (10). According to Chodorow, men's control of marriage and their claims to the private illustrate male domination over women and familial matters.

Importantly, Marxist feminist accounts of the development of capitalism in western society also significantly contribute to traditional feminist criticism of motherhood. Sociological discussions of the trajectory of industrialization, the relations of production and the formation of the public/private sphere provide both Rich and Chodorow the explanatory mechanisms to explain the material position of women and the social necessity of women's work. Both Rich and Chodorow extend upon several Marxist feminist analyses of private capital and its profound material and ideological restructuring of work and family. Although traditional feminist accounts of the development of capitalism and the rise of the private sphere fail to speak to the particular position of black women in western society, Marxist feminist analyses showcase the historic and material development of the need for the institution of motherhood to be biologically, psychologically and economically linked to women's bodies and their labor.

Rich and Chodorow both recount the rise of industrialization and the emergence of a separate sphere deemed private and domestic in western society. Accordingly, Rich and Chodorow each narrate that during pre-industrial societal formations, children (when they

became able), women, and men worked coextensively to produce and survive. Women's childbearing and rearing roles were intertwined with her role as producer of goods. During this time, women could not exclusively tend to the needs and care of children. With the rise of industrialization, the family moved from a subsistence unit of twelve to twenty-five people that produced goods and services to a consumption-based model in which goods and services were produced outside the home in factories (Katz 2007). As a result, some women, mostly bourgeois, became reduced to their reproductive capacities and child rearing while men became wage-earners. Overall, the idea of the domestic became rigidly gendered feminine. Consequently, Chodorow notes that "the family became a quintessentially relational and personal institution, *the personal sphere of society*"—or a place where women exclusively engaged in unpaid but necessary labor (4-5). Women's responsibilities, thus, became centered on the physical and emotional care of children and men, or what is considered exclusive motherhood by Rich, and became associated with domestic labor.

Diverging from Rich, Chodorow contends that feminists must move beyond descriptions of patriarchy and economic conditions and must begin to question how the sexual division of labor and social organization of gender become reproduced through the generations through psychological processes. Chodorow (1989) contends that feminists need to utilize a theory that explains "unconscious mental processes" (170). She critically engages with Freudian psychology and sociology and argues that the "social and political organization of gender" relies on individuals' psychological senses of self as a gendered being which is the result of the social constructs of gender (167). She writes that "we are all sexed and gendered in the first place...that we are all either men or women—which is a part of our fundamental identity and being in the world" (167). As such, feminists cannot understand the techniques of gender without taking into

account “people’s sexualization and engendering” (167). She argues that the process of engendering differs from traditional sociological notions of external roles, like worker, teacher, parent, etc. Gender is not a role that individuals stop enacting at will, such as a worker who stops being a worker after clocking out.

Chodorow situates psychoanalysis as a “theory of femininity and masculinity, a theory of gender inequality, and a theory of the development of heterosexuality” (174). Importantly, she also writes that “Freud’s theory is a social and political theory” since the analysis of development occurs in a specific and “particular social situation” (174). This social situation occurs in a family in which women mother. In this Freudian developmental account, women’s heterosexual attraction is something to be achieved and not a biological given. Additionally, women’s “true” object-love is toward children, and not necessarily towards men themselves which demonstrates that heterosexual coupling is a desired outcome in Freudian thought but not a natural and inevitable fact.

Utilizing object-relations and interpersonal psychoanalytic theory, Chodorow (1978) details how women's mothering becomes reproduced through "social structurally induced psychological processes" (7). Chodorow relies on psychoanalytic models of personality development to explicate how women's mothering creates feminine and masculine psychic structures which encompass particular gendered affects in children. Women's mothering "produce[s] daughters with mothering capacities and the desire to mother" (7). Alternatively, women's mothering "...produce[s] sons whose nurturant capacities and needs have been systematically curtailed and repressed" (7). As a result of psychological and relational development within the family unit, children's emotional and social capacities reproduce the sexual division of labor—women come to be the primary caretakers of children and family and

men become prepared to play less of a caretaking role in families and more prepared for their primary role in public life and work outside of the home. Chodorow's use of object-relations and interpersonal psychoanalytic theory stresses the importance of the relationship to the mother as a crucial point of development of gender identity. Her use of object-relations theory also focuses on the strengths and pitfalls of women's psychology and creates a space to question the naturalization and inevitability of the notion that women will become mothers.

White feminist literature on motherhood and family permits us to consider the historical construction of exclusive motherhood and the nuclear family as particular social formations and cultural ideals. This literature analyzes how motherhood is crucial to the reproduction of normative social orders that become transmitted through the idea of women as primary familial caretakers. Chodorow's work helps feminists explain the psychological mechanisms and development of women and men's internal sense of "natural" order and identity as traditional men and women. Rich's work, in particular, opens a path for feminists to consider the emotionally and physically tenuous, individual journey of women's attempts to achieve the idealized notion of the Perfect Mother. Although many women may find joy and motivation from the care of their children, Rich makes an important truth known—that so too can anger, rage, frustration, and the desire for a separate sense of self. Such personal and theoretical insights by Rich have created a model for many feminists to consider the political and individual contours of motherhood. Rich has also opened publication space for women to discuss the pleasures and pains of mothering, particularly in the memoir genre, but the genre has been dominated by many white female authors (Brown 2011; Philyaw 2016).

White feminist scholars have highlighted the role of patriarchy and capitalism in creating oppressive conditions in women's mothering. Leading motherhood studies scholar, Andrea O'

Reilly, however, writes that much of the Anglo-American theories and writings by the 1980s with the exception of Rich, was:

...daughter-centric and approached motherhood only as it had been defined by patriarchal culture. Specifically, it was work women did in the privacy of their homes that had no political import or cultural value and was oppressive to women. (x)

Writing in the twenty-first century, O'Reilly contends that feminism has not "recognized or embraced a feminism developed from the specific needs/concerns of mothers" and calls motherhood an "unfinished business of feminism" (O'Reilly, "Ain't I a Feminist?" 2014). Citing Rich and black feminist theorist, Patricia Hill Collins, and writer, Toni Morrison as untapped fruitful thinkers of motherhood, O'Reilly calls for traditional feminist theory to revalue motherhood and mother-daughter connections as spaces of empowerment. Though O'Reilly's criticism has merit and black feminist theories of motherhood can to an extent be a corrective to traditional feminist analyses of gender and the private sphere, black feminist discourses of motherhood also have their limitations and critical absences.

### ***1.1.2 Black Feminist Theories of Motherhood***

Though traditional feminist scholarship has provided a strong critique of dominant discourses of mothering as a biologically fixed component of society, traditional feminist genealogies of motherhood and the nuclear family in the West lack an accounting of the social treatment of the reproductive capacities of non-white and non-bourgeois subjects in the United States. Specifically, the captive African communities brought to the U.S. do not figure into the analyses of traditional feminist theories of motherhood and family. This elision has significant consequence. First, the elision undercuts universalist claims that the category of woman exists across cultures and time periods. More importantly, the limits of traditional feminisms require

that other experiences and bodies of scholarship be considered to think about motherhood as a lived experience and social category.

Scholar Oyèrónké Oyěwùmí, in “Family Bonds/Conceptual Binds: African Notes on Feminist Epistemologies,” argues that western anthropological and sociological accounts of society cannot and should not be applied cross-culturally. Oyěwùmí contends that the subject category woman in western feminist theory is rooted in the Euro-American nuclear family form, and that woman is a particular social construction based in western heteronormative social arrangements (1094). Because western feminists’ subject is a familial one, western feminist theories of gender cannot be understood to be universal. Oyěwùmí furthers that theorists such as Simone de Beauvoir and Nancy Chodorow who write on the universal “oppression of women,” center white, middle-class women’s experiences. She notes that the centering of white bourgeois women is not due to “white solipsism”—the “tendency to think, imagine, and speak as if whiteness describes the world” but rather a structural and conceptual problem caused by white feminists’ failure to see the “home” as one of the many “bounded and limited place(s)” to understand, experience, and organize the world (1095). Additionally, Spillers questions the applicability of psychoanalysis to subjects who do not fit the Freudian model. In “All the Things You Could Be by Now, If Sigmund Freud’s Wife Was Your Mother,” Spillers explores the applicability of psychoanalysis, such as those used by Chodorow, to understand and explicate black subject formation in general. She observes that theories of psychoanalysis and discussions of race have not had a merging or a consideration of one another. African American intellectuals do not see the uses of psychoanalytic thought in any iteration to understand issues of race. Also, scholars of psychoanalysis have not politically contextualized psychoanalysis’ biological, social, and cultural assumptions. Furthermore, Spillers asks how race plays out into the making of a

“self” by a social subject even while it is imposed upon a subject externally. Spillers makes the claim that African American intellectual writing fails to consider the roles of “fantasy, desire, the ‘unconscious’, of conflict, envy, aggression, and ambivalence” in African American lifeworlds” (76). Spillers’ invitation to explore the fantasies, desires and the unconscious of African American lifeworlds creates space for this project to consider the sometimes unspeakable affective and felt experiences of black women and their relationships to motherhood. Though Spillers suggests that psychoanalytic concepts may be helpful in creating new ways of understanding race, personality, and emotional life of African Americans, the Freudian archive however is very particular to the nuclear family of a bourgeois household in Viennese culture at the time that Freud was writing. Due to the lack of attention on black women, black feminist theories have focused on the ways that black women’s reproductive and relational capacities in the United States and across the diaspora have been defined and used under conditions of enslavement, colonialism and ongoing anti-black racism.

Though many works on motherhood exist, texts that circulate as major black feminist theoretical contributions on motherhood predominantly concern themselves with the devaluation and violence done upon black women’s reproduction from the era of enslavement through the contemporary era of neoliberalism and mass incarceration. Works by Angela Davis, bell hooks, Patricia Hill Collins, Dorothy Roberts, and Alexis Pauline Gumbs focus on the differential treatment of black women’s reproduction and mothering and seek recuperative ways of valuing black motherhood in the larger public sphere and within black communities. I argue that these works provide important interventions; they speak back to the dominant stereotypes of black women as damaging matriarchs and unfit mothers responsible for the social ills in black communities that financially and morally damage the American nation state, revealing that these

constructions are a means of ordering white supremacist capitalism heteropatriarchy. These works, however, do not undo social and ideological practices that expect and proscribe black girls and women to bear and mother. The fundamental assumption that bodies deemed black and female are expected sites of reproduction, rearing, and communal nurturing do not unravel maternity from the black female body. Because I am critical of the maternal imposition upon black female bodies, I move away from works that seek to redress the separation of mother and child. I search elsewhere. As such I am searching for an ambivalent maternal voice—one that says that children and mothering are not ideal. Collectively these works do not feature the voice I am looking for and often engage in mother worship. While doing so, they paint a voiceless maternal subject—one that was stripped of maternal rites and authority, or, if given voice, they are a maternal subject that embrace motherhood and family.

Because black feminist theorists are concerned with the violent and differential treatment of black motherhood, I argue that the black feminist theoretical archive is occupied with maternal injury and recuperation. I am drawing upon the work of Jennifer Nash that traces dominant frameworks in black feminist theory of visual representation which desires the black female body to be redressed. In *The Black Body in Ecstasy: Reading Race, Reading Pornography*, Jennifer Nash critiques black feminists' orientation toward visual representation of black women as a process that always wounds the black female body, rarely questioning the possibility that black female subjects, or protagonists and spectators, can and may experience ecstasy, or what she states is “the possibilities of female pleasures within a phallic economy and to the possibilities of black female pleasures within a white-dominated representational economy” (2). Nash argues that the “black feminist theoretical archive, a collection of texts and images...actively produces and enforces the idea of wounded black female flesh” (25).



Deploying an expansive idea of archive that includes scholarly works and artistic expressions, Nash contends that the black feminist theoretical archive has taken the treatment of the Saartje Baartman as a master symbol to understand the visual field's harm toward the black female body. Critical work and black feminist artistic engagements of the Hottentot Venus is one predominantly concerned with pain inflicted by the visual field. Nash focuses on the scholarly work of Patricia Hill-Collins and the subordination of black womanhood from controlling images, Hortense Spillers' discussion of pornotroping—the objectification and reduction of black women to sexuality, Janell Hobson's work on representation of black women's bodies, and Nicole Fleetwood's focus on visual iconography of black women as excess starting with Venus, to Josephine Baker, and present-day focus of black women's buttocks (Serena Williams). Concerned with wounded flesh, black feminist theory predominantly engages in an analytic framework that privileges “injury and recovery” of the black female body, which for Nash, makes “...theorizing black female pleasures from within the parameters of the archive a kind of impossibility” (25-26). The focus on injury enables the orientation of projects that seek to redress the black female body, which according to Nash becomes prized works in black feminist theory.

The predominate focus on injury and recuperation can be understood through history. Black feminist genealogies of motherhood coincide with the larger project of black feminist movement in the U.S during the 1970s. Black feminist theorists engaged in constructing a legible black woman subject during an era of liberation for women (read white) and black persons (read male). Caught between two major political movements that only politicized a single issue, black women had to stake out a politics that named and advocated for the remedy of racism and sexism. Barbara Smith in “Toward A Black Feminist Criticism” (1978), an essay that

marks a moment that articulates black feminism, noted that black women were “double nonentities”—since they are both black and woman (21). During the late 1960s and 1970s, Black feminists had to confront a field of absence that required the fashioning and a writing of a black feminist subject that could be politicized within Black Nationalist rhetorics and therefore imagined as black subjects. Knowing the historic constraints and conditions of black feminist theoretical production permits an understanding of why black mothers are talked about in patterned and specific ways. I argue that the pattern rarely introduces black mothers as ambivalent agents—a characteristic that could communicate negligence, selfishness, or shiftlessness on the part of black women.

In addition to the lack of politicization of the interlocking oppressions of race, sex, and class in black women’s lives within movement spaces, black feminists also had to deal with the widespread misnaming of black women within the larger public and political sphere. Much of the impetus to the recuperation of black motherhood was in response to the widely influential sociological understandings of the black family as matrifocal and black women as overbearing matriarchs. In the public document, *The Negro Family: The Case for National Action*, or commonly referred to as the Moynihan Report, U.S. Secretary of Labor Daniel Patrick Moynihan issued his controversial “study” on the crisis of black family structure in 1965 (Mumford 2012). Since its publication, numerous scholars, politicians, and journalists have debated its merit and/or extended his analysis of poverty, illegitimacy rates, and welfare dependency to familial arrangement. At the time of the federal government’s War on Poverty campaign, Moynihan sought to call for federal policy to remedy the centuries of maltreatment upon African American communities. Though Moynihan named slavery, Jim Crow, and current-day discrimination as barriers to equality of African Americans, Moynihan brought attention to a hidden problem—the

historic damage of racism upon what he termed “The Negro Family.” Using the “white family” as a standard, Moynihan compiled copious sociological data on the racial differences of illegitimacy rates, divorce trends, juvenile delinquency, and single-female headed household, Moynihan provided an analysis on the history of black family “decline” which he attributed to black male dependency and black female independence, or what he labeled matriarchy.

The Moynihan Report provided sociological data on the current state of the black family with charts, graphs, and prose on rates of illegitimacy, divorce, single female headed households, juvenile delinquency, and welfare dependency to construct his chapter on the “Roots of the Problem” of African American communities. Moynihan traced black male and female abnormal gender relations beginning with American slavery through Reconstruction and urbanization, noting that black women occupied the unusual role as a female worker and provider for the family without male support. Moynihan drew upon the works of noted scholars on American slavery, like Nathan Glazer and respected sociologists such as E. Franklin Frazier, Thomas Pettigrew, and Robert Staples—all noted scholars on the history of black folk culture and family. Moynihan considered American slavery the most awful slave system to ever exist since black men could not ascend to the order of humanity nor assume the rightful role as the patriarch in the family like white men (15). Black women, a group that had little choice in engaging in labor outside the home, were seen as subsuming a masculine role. Black men became known as castrated and effeminate since they could not assume the proper familial role. For Moynihan, pathological gender relations explained the lack of upward mobility and low status of African Americans. This familial abnormality begins with single black mothers and absence of patriarchal fathers as seen in the report's concluding chapter titled "The Case for National Action." Moynihan summarizes:

Three centuries of injustice have brought about deep-seated structural distortions in the life of the Negro American...the present tangle of pathology is capable of perpetuating itself without assistance from the white world...a national effort towards the problem of Negro Americans must be directed towards the question of family structure. (47)

With the swift of his pen, Moynihan shifted attention away from structural processes of inequality (racist discrimination, redlining, segregation, etc.) by deploying the notion of familial abnormality as the cause of economic and social inequality of African Americans in the United States. The resulting solution called government efforts that would elicit the development of patriarchal gender relations between black men and women through increasing rates of black male employment, military service, and marriage. Such efforts presumed to restore black male masculinity and the proper dynamic of male provider/protector and female passivity/homemaker between black men and women. Consequently, the Moynihan report's black matriarchy and male emasculation became a popular but flawed way to understand black inequality.

Unfortunately, the document became popular within black communities and fueled Black Nationalist claims for calling for black male power and black female submission and domesticity. As black male castration became a significant framework to understand and design black liberation, many black leaders during the liberation era began to call for restoration and retribution of the damages done to black masculinity. This restoration point began with the call for black male dominance and idealized visions of proper black femininity. Imamu Amiri Baraka's 1970's article, "Black Woman," best showcases his African woman ideal for black women. Baraka, an important figure in the Black cultural nationalist movement, elaborated that: "We do not believe in 'equality' of men and women...We could never be equals...nature has not provided thus...Thus this means that we will complement each other, that you, who I call *my*

*house*, because there is no house without a *man and his wife*, are the single element in the universe that perfectly completes *my essence*. You are essential, to the development of any life in the house, because you are that house's completion. When we say complement, completes, we mean that we have certain functions which are more natural to us, and you have certain grace that are yours alone. We say that a Black woman must first be able to *inspire her man*, then she must be able to *teach our children*, and contribute to the *social development of the nation*. How do you inspire Black Man? By being the conscious rising essence of Blackness...By race, by identity, and by action. You inspire Black Man by being Black Woman. By being the nation, as the house, the smallest example of how the nation should be. So you are my 'house,' I live in you, and together we have a house, and that must be the microcosm, by example, of the entire Black nation. Our nation is our selves." (Baraka 1970, my emphasis)

Baraka's expressed ideology is not an isolated statement; it represents the widespread vision of black women's role in the making of a black nation prominently found within Black Nationalist rhetoric of the 1960s, such as those of Malcom X, Elijah Muhammad, Huey Newton, Stokely Carmichael and later Afrocentric projects in the United States (Collins 2007). Baraka, heavily influenced by Maulana Karenga, rejects the idea of gender equality between men and women within the imagined black nation. Baraka, instead, opts to advocate for the notion of gender complementarity—an essentializing logic that premises a "natural" gender binary and sex-role function. For Baraka, and other Black Nationalists, the black nation is metaphorically articulated as an imaginary home. The perfect house/nation incorporates two fundamental building blocks—the universal beings he calls, the "Black Man" and the "Black Woman." These two forms co-create the nation through heteronormative coupling and reproduction as the

house/nation requires the marriage between a “man and his wife” since no proper house is without this symbiotic form.

The imagined house/nation cannot exist without the idealized “Black Woman.” Black Nationalist freedom visions often required an objectifying and limited ideal of black women. According to Baraka, the “Black Woman” is a necessary object and property of the black nation; Baraka names her as his house—a house that he lives in. As a declared symbol of the house/nation, the “Black Woman” must be reduced to a pure essence of black femininity—a femininity bound to a male counterpart—a femininity bound to both a domestic and communal role. As such, the ideal woman in the black nation must become a wife and mother; she must bear and rear the race and ensure the development of black men and children. Without her, the nation ceases to exist.

Though the Moynihan document was written and published by a white male and circulated amongst white government officials, I must highlight how the patriarchal sentiments of the famed report preceded its construction and the values already circulated amongst black men and women. Some black sociologists have argued that Moynihan misappropriated the work of black sociological studies of the black family. Kevin Mumford extends the argument that Moynihan misread many of the famed sociological studies of black families in slavery, and only quoted heavily from those, such as E. Franklin Frazier, to gain legitimacy and protection from accusations of racism. Although Moynihan chose only to cite certain works, passages, and words of sociological data in the report, the archive of knowledge on black family life as constructed by black sociologists then relied on the preferred nuclear family unit. As such, Moynihan’s genealogy did not have to create new information—the archive on black family

breakdown and disorder and black men's attachment to patriarchal ordering existed prior to the report.

Given that black feminist theorists have had to confront a field of theoretical absence within literature and history, dominant understandings of black women as matriarchs within sociology, and political rhetoric that blamed poor single black mothers for black poverty and social inequality, much of the black feminist theoretical archive on motherhood has been in response to this political milieu. By piecing together historical and literary texts, black feminist theorists have constructed a black maternal subject that has been harmed beginning with the history of colonization and enslavement. These recovery projects of motherhood function as correctives to race, class, and sex oppression by bringing black women back to womanhood—incorporating black female subjects back into a valued liberal humanity through maternity.

Dorothy Roberts explains:

Blaming Black mothers...is a way of subjugating the Black race as a whole...Being a mother is considered a woman's major social role. Society defines all women as mothers or potential mothers. Motherhood is compulsory for women: most little girls expect to become mothers, and women who do not are considered deviant. Because women have been defined in terms of motherhood, devaluing this aspect of a women's identity is especially devastating. It cuts to the heart of what it means to be valued as a woman. (10)

Roberts later furthers that:

The right to bear children goes to the heart of what it means to be human. The value we place on individuals determines whether we see them as entitled to perpetuate themselves in their children. Denying someone the right to bear children—or punishing her for exercising that right—deprives her of a basic part of her humanity. When this denial is

based on race, it also functions to preserve a racial hierarchy that essentially disregards Black humanity. (305)

I agree with Roberts that society dictates that girls become women who must later become mothers. Roberts, who desires for black women to take control of their bodies, especially as it relates to matters of reproduction, leaves the compulsory institution of motherhood intact in her argument. The intent is not to undo the human category since that has already been done for black subjects—but to craft a road to humanity that expands the category in the first place. I am ambivalent about the expansion and the terms by which we use to stake humanness. Liberal terms of gender remain the access points by which black feminist theorists on mothering hitch black women’s humanity. As such, the sex/gender assignment of female/femininity is left to be untangled from mothering and maternal imposition upon black female bodies continue as a preferred norm. I am not saying that mothers should not exist. I am saying, however, that the black feminist archive on mothering is an often liberal tale that leaves traditional assumptions that bind girls and women to motherhood by narrating assaults upon the girl-woman-mother logic chain. What of those black girls and women who do not want to express maternity? What of those black girls and women who later bore or took in children but never wanted the role or later found the role constraining and oppressive? Those questions point to black female deviancy and the black feminist theoretical archive orients itself on protecting black women and mothers from claims of deviancy. My queries on these black women and girls are marginal as notions of maternity and humanity remain uncontested terms to narrate black female being.

### ***1.1.3 Visiting the Black Feminist Theoretical Archive of Motherhood***

Davis’ “Reflections on the Black Slave Women in the Community of Slaves” (1972) narrates the violent and differential treatment of black slave women and their maternity. Davis’



text recounts how the slave system enforced specific imperatives for black women's reproductive capacities that differed from white middle-class women's imperative to mother in heterosexual, marital nuclear families. Considering the unique position of black female slaves and the structure of white supremacy, Davis suggests an alternative reading of black women and domesticity. Unlike white feminist theorists who contest the public/private divide and the institution of motherhood, Davis (and later hooks, Collins, Roberts, and Gumbs) argues that black women and men constructed a private home space that sheltered, however temporary, from the harsh realities of white supremacy. The home and the domestic constituted spaces that could offer reprieve and a sense of humanity that was denied to them in the public sphere.

Davis unravels the myth of the castrating black matriarch that whites and blacks often circulated. Considered a gross misnomer, Davis explicates how the matriarchy myth damages black liberationist movement and black male and female relationships. She states that the "notorious cliché, the 'emasculating female,' has its roots in the fallacious inference that in playing a central part in the slave 'family,' the black woman related to the slaveholding class as collaborator" (2). The stakes are high. Black women seen as conspiring with the oppressor (the white male) are deemed agents against the struggle of black men. The sentiments to establish male rule or black male patriarchy gain traction. Davis also writes that the myth functions as "an open weapon of ideological warfare" within black communities (14). As such, men lash out at women and women "[sink] back into the shadows, lest an aggressive posture resurrect the myth in themselves" (14). The overbearing black female, for Davis, must be put to rest. Because black slave women could not legally claim their child nor exercise any meaningful authority, Davis shows the fallaciousness of the matriarchate thesis.

In place of the matriarchal figure, Davis presents an insurgent female slave subject that serves as a heroic co-conspirator alongside black slave men in the struggle for freedom—a historic situation that Davis finds parallel and desires for male black liberationists to take up regarding black women for the late 20<sup>th</sup> century. Davis admits that there is a “paucity of literature on the black woman” (1) and that “...black women of the slave era remain more or less enshrouded in unrevealed history” except for the life stories of Harriet Tubman and Sojourner Truth (7). Faced with the lack of archival information on the day-to-day life of slave women, Davis expresses an ideal historic imagination about resistance and freedom by black slave women. Davis writes of the black slave woman:

an intricate and savage web of oppression intruded at every moment into the black woman’s life during slavery. Yet a single theme appears at every juncture: the woman transcending, refusing, fighting back, asserting herself over and against terrifying obstacles. It was not her comrade brother against whom her incredible strength was directed. She fought alongside her man, accepting or providing guidance according to her talents and the nature of her tasks. She was in no sense an authoritarian figure; neither her domestic role nor her acts of resistance could relegate the man to the shadows. On the contrary, she herself had just been forced to leave behind the shadowy realm of female passivity in order to assume her *rightful* place beside the insurgent male. (13, my emphasis)

Under Davis’ account, *the* black slave woman presented is a conscious freedom fighter whose main desire for freedom is undoing the slave system. The subject maintains her heterosexual and maternal role but also takes up the struggle outside of her domestic realm alongside her male counterpart. Davis iterates this subject’s acts of sabotage to their masters’ health and property

(see Davis' accounts of poisoning and arson) and her active participation in open revolts. For Davis, this female freedom fighter is one that wages resistance against slavery which she suffers brutal physical assault like her male counterpart. Unlike her male counterpart, she had to endure the experience of sexual violence (rape). Because of her struggle, she served as a critical figure and member of the slave community, which, for Davis, marks her as the "strong black wom[a]n" (7) subject that many admire and expect black women in the 21<sup>st</sup> century to embody (Beauboeuf-Lafontant 2009).

It is Davis' imagining of *the* black slave woman as constituting the space of the black domestic that I take issue. For Davis, the black slave woman mothered the community and was "assigned the mission of promoting the consciousness and practice of resistance" to "ensure the survival of her people" (3). This made the insurgent female slave valuable. The slave woman/mother in Davis' account is one concerned with ending slavery and its brutal conditions, which is the fundamental meaning of freedom. This kind of freedom is concerned with group survival and not about a desire to make her own path of freedom that may include the group or not. Because black women have been accused as emasculating their man, which for Davis, positions her as a traitorous woman, the undoing of this myth limits the terms to articulate a black woman subject that I desire—one that is concerned with a freedom to make a life for self that may or may not involve the nurturance of others. This kind of subject, imagined another way, could be a freedom fighter for the race or one for her own sake. She could leave duty and legacies of slave domesticity. I highlight the limiting contours of Davis' genealogy of agentive black women because it shapes how current understandings of black women's "place" in struggles for black female freedom. I do not want to deny the usefulness of this kind of black female insurgent that Davis carves, but it also does not speak the freedom dreams of black

women and girls who do not desire the constraints of racism nor the realms of patriarchal domesticity and maternity.

Though Davis figures the living quarters as a space away from the master's whip, that does not mean it was a space absent racial and sexual exploitation. I do not deny the account of the transgressive potential of black women's work and labor in the domestic to resisting white supremacy, but just as Davis imagines this potential, I acknowledge the real possibility that the domestic space—which included the mandates of nurturance and caretaking of others—served as barrier to black women's freedom. Davis recounts historic records that document the practice of forced coupling and permitted family arrangements which benefited the slave owner's desire for more healthy slaves. In these accounts, the forced coupling would involve unwanted sex and procreation. Imagine a slave woman/mother that lives in the quarters with a mate and unwanted children. In these instances, the living quarters could be an oppressive site for black women/mothers and would not function as cohesive a unit of harmonious black women and men that Davis imagines to collectivize and fight against masters. If the black slave woman/mother subject was conscious of her historic condition, it is also likely that she associated the mandates of the patriarchal role of woman as the nurturer, the keeper of warmth of the house, and procreator as problematic roles to take on, especially if there were those for whom this imposition did not apply. I find this potential latent because I have a queer desire and belief that there were slave women/mothers who desired neither the institution of slavery nor the demands of domesticity of the living quarter. Quite possibly the subject I am interested in could be in the less desired bunch of women in Davis' account whom she terms "indifferent" and "outright traitors" (13).

Addressing historic and sociological studies that exclude focus on black women and the popular sentiment that sexism is not an issue in the life of black women, bell hooks compiles historic studies of 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century on chattel slavery, women's slave narratives, diary entries, articles, and speeches, to show the importance of a feminist movement that ends sexist oppression and all forms of domination for black women. hooks focuses almost exclusively on the denial of protection because of their lack of access to the patriarchal privileges attributed to white womanhood. hooks presents a powerless black female subject who was subjected to degradations of racism and sexism beginning with the traumas aboard slave ships. hooks cites how captive African females suffered from pregnancy, birth, and death while also being vulnerable to the sexual advances of the crew.

hooks' genealogy permits the possibility to problematizing notions of black women's burden to work, family, and mothering. hooks does not go there. Her black female subject (both enslaved and post-enslaved) desires patriarchal arrangements, writing that black women "...were not proud of their ability to labor alongside men in the fields and wanted more than anything for their lot to be the same as that of white women" (hooks 48). hooks further clarifies the voice of black women on family and motherhood in later works. In *Feminist Theory From Margin to Center* (1984), hooks' black women were not concerned with the plights of motherhood or home. She reflects on the conventional view of motherhood held within the feminist movement which positioned motherhood as an obstacle to self-actualization. According to hooks, the black woman, having been in the world of work for centuries, knew better—knew that the world of work was an exploitive and alienating experience that denigrated her, and, at many times, denied her humanity. The voice given to the black woman expressed an oppositional desire. She yearned for and said: "We want to have more time to share with family, we want to leave the world of

alienated work” (134). The attachment to family, home, and motherhood constructs a black maternal subject that does not problematize the position and experience of mothering and domesticity.

I am suspicious of the shared black woman’s voice. First, it forecloses the possibility of a maternal voice that might desire otherwise. It also marginalizes those voices of black women that found the space of mothering and family undesirable, alienating, and as a barrier to black women’s freedom. Finally, it fails to contextualize why such a voice stands as the representative of black women. hooks does not include analysis in this particular section of her work on how desiring patriarchal arrangements may have been tied to her former focus on the assimilation of American sexual and gender ethos nor the rise of the romanitization of womanhood and its promises of male protection from the 1940s and 1950s occurring in mainstream popular culture. It also does not problematize how the limited means by which black women could articulate any other kinds of sentiments towards motherhood because those desires would have been too unthinkable or taboo to begin with. The paradigmatic voice of black women on motherhood for hooks and Davis becomes the desire for the black domestic sphere as an overall positive space for realizing black humanity.

The lack of ambivalence expressed and assumption of family as the “least oppressive” permits black feminist theoretical mother worship or the honoring of maternal duty fulfilled by black girls and women to go uninterrogated. In “Homeplace (a site of resistance),” another popular anthologized black feminist essay cited in motherhood studies, hooks narrates home as a political site of resistance to white racism much like the imaginings of Davis’ reflection of insurgent slave women. hooks speaks on the practice of mother worship. She states:

In African-American culture there is a long tradition of “mother worship.” Black autobiographies, fiction, and poetry praise the virtues of the self-sacrificing black mother. Unfortunately, though positively motivated, black mother worship extols the virtues of self-sacrifice while simultaneously implying that such a gesture is not reflective of choice and will, rather the perfect embodiment of a woman’s “natural” role. The assumption then is that the black woman who works hard to be a responsible caretaker is only doing what she should be doing. Failure to recognize the realm of choice, and the remarkable re-visioning of both woman’s role and the idea of “home” that black women consciously exercised in practice, obscures the political commitment to racial uplift, to eradicating racism, which was the philosophical core of dedication to community and home. (387)

As a personal essay, hooks recounts through her memory as a daughter and granddaughter of powerful and nourishing women in a valued domestic space that operates outside white supremacy and capitalism. The attribution of will and agency to black mothers that fulfill maternal expectations distinguishes typical “mother worship,” which sexist interpretations would view black women’s unconscious inclination to reproductive labor as apolitical activity. While hooks redirects our attention to the importance of agency in the political choice to mother, like Davis, hooks desires black women to “renew our political commitment to homeplace” to guide young girls and women to liberation struggle and forgo “imitating leisure-class sexist notions of women’s role, focusing their lives on meaningless compulsive consumerism” (389). The maternal insurgents must make a comeback for hooks who notes that “black people began to overlook and devalue the importance of black female labor in teaching critical consciousness in domestic space” (389). I respect her envisioning black women as resistance teachers, yet the

judgment upon those who do not engage in this struggle become less desired subjects. A hierarchy of prized black women and mothering occurs.

Furthermore, I also disagree with hooks, who states that “It does not matter that sexism assigned” black women the role to take care of home, men, and children since they ensured the survival of black life and worked toward liberation (385). Though hooks is committed to ending patriarchy, theorists should not assume all black women welcomed their role or presume that all black women within liberation movements succeeded with their care work. I imagine that more than a few black women opted out of their maternal duty and/or would have desired another social dynamic if imagined to be ambivalent. Additionally, while black women’s making of hompelace may attempt to transgress racism that denies black beings humanity, the honoring of the choice to care keeps intact the liberal and black humanist notions that dictate women to selflessly mother the race regardless of the costs to black women’s well-being.

The similar attachment to struggle and honoring maternal sacrifice and commitment continues in the works of black feminist sociologist Patricia Hill Collins. Collins’ accounts of black motherhood have been treated as primary black feminist theoretical contributions to the study of motherhood (O’Reilly 2007). Collins’ *Black Feminist Thought* (1990) and subsequent essays, “The Meaning of Motherhood in Black Culture and Black Mother-Daughter Relationships” (1991) and “Shifting the Center: Race, Class, and Feminist Theorizing about Motherhood” (1994) explicate what she terms an Afrocentric theory of black motherhood—a perspective that centers the experiences of black women’s gender, race, and class oppression. Collins’ work serves as scholarly and political intervention into sociological research and political discourse surrounding black women that stereotype black women as Mammies, Matriarchs, Jezebels, and welfare queens (*Black Feminist Thought* 1990). The orientation of



sacrifice threads her work as she roots her work on motherhood in the “need for Black feminists to honor our mothers’ sacrifice...” (Collins, *Black Feminist Thought* 115).

To make black mothering specific and perhaps exceptional, Collins (1990) points to the particular contours of black motherhood. First, Collins observes that black motherhood draws upon West African traditions that value mothers, their work, and shared caring responsibilities amongst women-centered networks of bloodmothers, othermothers, and community othermothers. In addition to survival, motherhood serves as a status and source of power for black women. Black women’s commitment to racial uplift and the development of children’s sense “self-reliance and independence” (especially in black daughters) are critical to “fostering African American community development” and “forms the basis for community based power” (132). Collins observes that women who have led rearing in communities resemble the “...type of power many African Americans have in mind when they describe the ‘strong black women’ they see around them in traditional African American communities” (132). Collins argues that the othermothering has a “more generalized ethic of caring and personal accountability among African American women who often feel accountable to all the black community’s children” (129). Because othermothering occurs outside the heterosexual, two-parent nuclear unit and often includes the care of non-blood kin, Collins acknowledges the potential for reformulating traditional ideals of mothering that position one woman with child(ren). The structure also challenges the idea of children as personal property since the community shares and invests responsibility into the rearing of the next generation.

Collins’ work could potentially provide an alternative reading and theorizing of black motherhood as an ambivalent and/or oppressive site for black women. She connects few life narratives of black mothers who have struggled to mother, such as the mothers of Ann Moody,

Sara Brooks, and June Jordan. In doing so, some personal costs of motherhood are revealed, but Collins does not further explore. Collins moves on to narratives of black women that find mothering empowering and as an experience that gives them hope. Overall, Collins builds her thematic stance on black motherhood with the stories of women who have endured and/or struggled to mother in the face of adversity.

In *Killing the Black* (1997), Roberts captures the limits of reproductive freedom and racial equality movements' collective silence on the issue of black women's reproduction. In doing so, she argues for a critical intervention—that the conception of reproductive liberty must expand beyond the right to an abortion to a more positive conception of liberty that requires governments to ensure the right to parent under safe and healthy conditions. Roberts importantly tracks how government proposals and enactments to incentivize the long-term birth control products, Norplant and Depo-Provera, to welfare recipients constitutes an eugenicist practice that target the reproduction of poor single mothers despite both conservative and liberal advocates that view these initiatives as enhancing black women's choices. According to Roberts, these government policies are the result of historic and contemporary archetypes of black women and motherhood, such as the Mammy/Negligent Black Mother, the Jezebel/Immoral Black Mother, the Matriarch/Black Unwed Mother, and the Welfare Queen/Devious Black Mother (10-19).

Though I find Roberts' study important to tracking state violence and popular control aimed at black subjects, her work does not engage in rethinking motherhood as a problematic institution and imposition on the bodies of black women and girls. Roberts' focus on severance in accounts of black motherhood invoke the pain of maternal injury. The historic accounts make it difficult to imagine a black maternal voice who did not want to mother since the record shared are of those who have ached to be mothers. The slave mother represented is one who desires to

keep her blood child even though the historic record offers accounts of black slave women who were forced to reproduce. Though Roberts shares anecdotes of forced coupling and the rape of black women under slavery there is little focus on Black women's efforts to avoid bearing children. She, like hooks' and Davis' accounts of black women's reproductive labor, stakes resistance in mothering itself.

Building from black feminist literary productions from 1968-1996, Alexis Pauline Gumbs (2010) argues that black feminist practitioners and activists responded to the intense vilification of poor black mothers during the rise of neoliberalism in the U.S. and abroad by deploying a revisionist definition of mothering. Gumbs explores the literary works, activism, and careers of black lesbian and bisexual feminists, Audre Lorde, Barbara Smith, Alexis De Veaux, and June Jordan and argues that each of these women put forth a queer, or non-normative, theory and practice of care for community and future generations. For Gumbs, the poetry, literature, and teaching of black feminists under study talked back to the dominant ideas of black life as expendable. They also contested Black Nationalist ethos that valued patriarchal family and organization of black communities and black women as only wives and mothers through their literature, poetry, and teaching which premised lesbian relationships and bisexuality, anti-racism, and rearing children as collective responsibility. For Gumbs, black feminist literary production produced a queer archive of mothering because their writings advanced a theoretical mode and practice of survival and love of black life in the contemporary era. Black life is not meant to survive, and black feminists at the space of mothering, as per Gumbs, has ensured and nourished black survival while also arguing for reproductive autonomy, varying sexual expressions, and communal care.

Extending Hortense Spillers' recounting of the differential treatment of black women under the institution of enslavement, Gumbs claims that the failure to establish the legal rites of motherhood to captive females produced a dangerous potential to black mothering. Mothering, the domestic labor that women perform, in the case of captive females did not have to be beholden to heteropatriarchal understandings of proper reproduction. Thus, black life did and can continue to be reproduced on terms outside white supremacist, patrilineal, and capitalist ethos. Gumbs contends that "Black mothers queerly disrupt a reproductive narrative about what (whose) life is worth, a narrative that says that Black life is worth less and that life itself can be valued and used differently based on race, economic status, gender etc." (50). Black women, with no rites to their offspring, mothered and sustained black life on terms that were not predicated on its property value. Gumbs continues a queer reading of black mothering into the twentieth century. Like Davis, hooks, Roberts, and Collins, Gumbs continues black feminist investments in women's mothering and advances the revolutionary potential of black feminists' calls for community care and collective responsibility of children.

Overall, black feminist literature on motherhood has made important interventions. It has revealed a black female subject that has been excluded from the boundaries of white womanhood and has constructed a black maternal subject that works in and outside the home and one that desires to nurture family. This body of literature has also recorded the historic and contemporary plotting of society's treatment of black women's reproductive capacities which has required feminists to acknowledge the structuring influence of social systems beyond patriarchy and capitalism, such as stratifications created by racism and white supremacy. Though this literature has tracked the differential treatment of black motherhood, black feminist literature has rarely focused on black women's refusal to reproductive and familial demands. Perhaps due to political

commitments to defend black mothers in need (a necessary project) and/or disciplinary constraints, black feminist theoretical discussions fail to focus on the potential exceptions to the rule: the women who may not want to mother or nurture others at all. Black feminist theory does not know how to account for those women who refuse to be “de mule of da world” through motherwork. The focus on the differential treatment and injury to maternal bonds and the stressing of black women’s familial commitments keep intact the foundational relationship of woman and maternity and keep ambivalent Sapphire mothers in unmentionable theoretical territory.

## **1.2 Research Questions**

This project diverges from these bodies of literature by asking the following questions:

- (1) What about the imposition of motherhood can be problematic to the lives of black women and girls?
- (2) What does black women’s ambivalence and/or refusal to mother sound like and feel like?
- (3) Can black maternal ambivalence and/or refusal have any political utility to black feminist imaginings of freedom?

## **1.3 Methodology**

I initially began research for my project with the broad idea of narratives of motherhood told by black feminists and a desire to build an archive of texts that demonstrate black maternal ambivalence and/or refusal. Before I critically thought about the where of my looking; the form of the stories I confronted; and who was doing the telling, I went searching for “true” accounts of black mothers who have expressed displeasure in and rejected mothering. I wanted Sapphire’s writing on the topic, and I wanted historic and sociological seals of approval on the matter. So, I copiously searched history books and sociological studies on black women and family with the

minimal hope for locating a black mother's voice that expresses a taboo desire. At my hope's peak, I anxiously looked for a text that chronicled a black mother's yearning for a kind of being and space not tied to a sense of duty to others (blood and fictive). I thought, just maybe, I could find her voice in an interview or in a published diary entry. I searched too often to be met with disappointing results. Yet, I often still find myself returning to various historical and sociological texts that examine black women's history and contemporary reality of work and family dynamics, hoping to come across the perfect study or maybe even an overlooked point that makes a case for black mothers refusing motherhood and family. I return and nothing. I go back again, looking through stacks of library books and online journals—and nothing. At some point, I have had to ask myself—why is that I keep returning to these kinds of sources? I finally realized that it is due to an affective attachment to truth and what kinds of genres of knowledge feel “real” rather than “made up.” My feminist education has not failed me. I intellectually understand that knowledge is political, partial and contingent. However, I still *feel* that sociology and history wear the cloaks of truth with a capital “T” regarding the world and people. If the sociologists and historians have “found” who and what I am looking for, then such subjects and objects must exist and my own inquiries and ambivalent feelings about motherhood would be validated.

Faced with the absence of a study on the ambivalent interiority of black mothers in these fields and my strong desire to find my particular black maternal voice, I have had to look elsewhere. That elsewhere has led me to black women's literature, poetry, and drama. Our creative realms have given us the license to imagine what Toni Morrison has described as “unspeakable things unspoken” about black life (1988). Unsurprisingly, it is in literature that I have confronted complex maternal figures such as Toni Morrison's Sethe and Eva Peace, women

who loved but kill their children. It is in Pearl Cleage's drama that I have found black mothers, like Alice, who leaves her child and husband to become a poet in Paris and lives to tell the tale. Creative genres have provided an entry point to exploring unspoken truths about black mothers' lives and have presented me with the black maternal voice that I have wanted to locate.

Exploring why these absences occur in certain venues and not others is not the primary goal of my project. But, I must emphasize here the importance of genre and the significance of black women's literary domains. Given that the disciplines of history and sociology have either ignored or distorted black female subjectivity while also barring people of color from the academy in general, other avenues of thinking, writing, and imagining black women's lives have been performed (and continue so) elsewhere. As Barbara Christian wrote in 1987, "...people of color have always theorized—but in forms quite different from the Western form of abstract logic...our theorizing...is often in narrative forms, in the stories we create, in riddles and proverbs, in the play with language" (57). This is not to say that black women and other people of color have not theorized in established disciplines prior to or during Christian's lifetime. Christian's criticism stands to make the case for the study of past and present literature and poetry written by black women in the face of institutional pressures that over-emphasize the development of high theory. Her observations point to the importance of examining other forms of knowledge production, such as my use of Pearl Cleage's play, *Hospice*, which involve meaning-making about the world which may not stress "...empirical observation and critical analysis from a distanced perspective" (Conquergood 146). Cleage, an artist and mother, can root herself in a study and construction of a black maternal figure and produce in a form that does not follow the traditional scientific method of discussion. Furthermore, legitimized genres, such as sociology and history, prize the twinning process that pits rationality against emotion and

objectivity against subjectivity, or the prioritization of western abstract logic, to borrow Christian's words. Such priorities create constraints on who and what can be discussed. For history, evidentiary standards for truth claims about the who and the what of the past traditionally must be substantiated by demonstrating a cool distant study of primary sources coupled by an engagement of previous notable thinkers on the topic of study. Of course, the claim to truth is dependent upon existing records and political consensus of what an appropriate primary source constitutes. If your subject or object in the historic archive has little to no trace, such as the maternal voice that I desire, they must either be found in other places or reimagined altogether such as in the form of historical fiction. Because I am concerned with the interior world and voice of a subject that may not have gotten the chance to read, write, or express their feelings and thoughts freely (i.e. an enslaved mother), other kinds of sources must be considered.

Similarly, the field of sociology sets out to study social interaction and to abstract findings into intelligible accounts of truth. Sociological inquiries traditionally begin with examining society's composition and relationship between individuals (man, woman, child), groups (family, race, class), and organizations (schools, church, associations) within a nation and/or state. The concern for recording a subject's voice and interiority, such as the day-to-day experience of taboo emotions and expressions of a black mother that I desire, is not mutually exclusive to the enterprise of social inquiry. My preoccupations, however, do not fit neatly into the discipline's traditional frameworks of study. Dominant sentiments privilege quantitative data collection and evaluations, often taking different forms of mathematical measures and statistical analyses. Social activity, though complex, must be measurable and generalizable; and discussions of "truth" must become organized, ordered, and reasoned about. And though sociology permits qualitative methods for obtaining data that involve direct researcher-subject



interactions (i.e., interviews and participant observations) and makes room for participant and researcher voice in these frameworks, certain questions or kinds of subjects, such as the ambivalent or abandoning black mother may not be explored. Additionally, people are often hesitant to admit ambivalence in interviews, thus capturing such data through traditional methods may be difficult to ascertain. With the black feminist sociological and historic attachments to painting broad strokes that depict black mothers as committed maternal figures, such studies have set aside those women who do not fit this dominant trend.

Because of disciplinary constraints, creative genres have provided black women thinkers and writers more freedom to imagine, explore, and record black women's lives in their various spaces, contours, and textures. It is because of creative forms' relation to freer imagining and exploration that this project studies both scholarly texts and literary ones, such as Toni Cade Bambara's *The Black Woman* anthology, which encompasses poetry, short stories, and personal essays written by black women, and Pearl Cleage's drama, *Hospice*. The presence of the creative has been critical to learning and exploring black women's history, place, and relationships to self and others. Like Christian later expressed in her "Race For Theory" (1998) essay, "...literature... seemed to me to have the possibilities of rendering the world as large and as complicated as I experienced it, as sensual as I knew it was. In literature, I sensed the possibility of the integration of feeling/knowledge, rather than the split between the abstract and the emotional" (56). Creative forms, such as the fiction of Toni Morrison and the poetry of Audre Lorde, attenuate emotion, complexity, and voice with authorial purposes that are not about explicating a methodological coherence often found in the methodology sections in books and journal articles that I have been searching through. That is not to say that literature and poetry are not labor-intensive nor have their own rigor in their methods of production. It means that literary and poetic forms can

explore and present information, or data, about the world and its people and things in a variety of ways—ways that may be deemed too political and personal because they do not fit disciplinary conventions of ascertaining, proving, and presenting truth.

In lieu of the lack of black maternal ambivalence in historic and sociological research and its presence in literary forms, I have had to examine my attachments to truth and become attuned to disciplinary archives. Typically, an archive conjures up images of a physical place, maybe a concrete building filled with boxes, remnants, papers of the past—some sterile and organized—others unruly, forgotten, there to be managed, catalogued. Archives also hold information, facts, knowledge, or truths. They are real, material—the evidence of realities past and present. It is this idea of archives—“true” written accounts (diaries, essays, and letters)—I was hoping to encounter in my search for a black maternal voice that wanted out of familial imperatives. The work of South Asian and sexuality studies scholar, Anjali Arondekar, however, discusses archives as not simply a physical space that holds material items but rather as something more ideological and diffuse to those hoping to find record of a subject/object that may barely leave any or no evidentiary trace in traditional historic records. In *For the Record*, Arondekar studies the relationship between sexuality and British colonial history in 19<sup>th</sup> century India. Arondekar notes that the imperial archive “...was not a building, nor even a collection of texts, but the collective imagined junction of all that was known or knowable, a fantastic representation of an epistemological master pattern” (2). Diverging from traditional views of the archive as a stable repository of knowledge, an empirical source of evidence, Arondekar approaches the archive as effect. Meaning, rather than viewing the archive as a place that holds a library of information regarding subjects and events, the archive becomes an object that produces subjects’ and events’ meanings. The archive becomes a “system of representation...with ‘real’ consequence” (4). The

archive in this figuration mediates and creates narratives of history, subjects, and locations, or as Arondekar writes, makes "...the processes of subjectification... possible (and desirable) through the very idiom of the archive" itself (3). Considering the archive as effect, Arondekar understands archives as non-singular and heavily influenced by disciplinary conventions. As each discipline produces its own archive, Arondekar asks "how do specific genres of texts, produce specific histories, subjects, evidence, and how are those effects mobilized?" (15).

I apply Arondekar's discussion of archives to black feminist sociological and historical mediations on motherhood. I examine how black feminist theorists have narrated the history and experience of black motherhood and have produced certain kinds of maternal subjects and feelings. I also draw upon the work of Jennifer Nash by deploying her concept of a black feminist theoretical archive. In *The Black Body in Ecstasy: Reading Race, Reading Pornography*, Nash critiques black feminist theories of visual representation. For her consideration of a black feminist theoretical archive, Nash deploys both theoretical scholarship produced by Hortense Spillers, Patricia Hill Collins, and Greenwood, and visual artists, such works by photographer Renee Cox. Nash's idea of a black feminist theoretical archive is expansive as it includes both academic texts and visual art as each are well-known, oft-cited works that circulate as *the* black feminist theoretical stance on matters of visual representation and the black female body. I want to propose a similar concept for my project, which I refer to as the black feminist theoretical archive of motherhood. I understand that the idea of a black feminist theoretical archive is broad and contentious. There is no one articulation of black feminism nor archive. Studies and stories of black motherhood spans various disciplines from literature, history, sociology, gender and sexuality studies, and public health and policy; and each discipline has its own sets of assumptions about the world, historic events, and the subjects that

occupy reality and life. Yet, there are common and well-circulated black feminist texts (scholarly and artistic) that are considered crucial to the understanding of black motherhood and its history and political reality. The black feminist theoretical archive on motherhood spans disciplinary bounds, and I argue, includes well-known scholarly texts ranging from Patricia Hill Collins' *Black Feminist Thought* to literary works like *Beloved* by Toni Morrison.

For purposes of my thesis, I specifically focus on the scholarly works produced by Angela Davis, bell hooks, Hortense Spillers, Patricia Hill Collins, Dorothy Roberts, and Alexis Pauline Gumbs to discuss black feminist theorists' social, historic, and cultural imaginaries of motherhood. Considering black feminist theoretical works, I approach each as sites of narrative production, or as a site of stories told. Approaching the theoretical archive, I keep in mind the following questions: What stories about motherhood do black feminist theorists tell?; Who are the central players and conflicts in these stories?; Who are the "bad guys"?; What subjects are prioritized and/or celebrated? What subjects are given minimal attention?; What subjects and associated feelings are produced? What (im)possibilities are imagined and/or foreclosed? It is the *whatever* and the *lack of desire* that I want my project to pause, revel, and imagine within. What were the feelings and thoughts of bloodmothers that did not want to bear and/or rear? What could be useful about these women and their ambivalence, lack, and/or refusal to mother, for black feminist theories of motherhood and womanhood?

With these questions in mind, this thesis intervenes in what I consider dominant black feminist theoretical discussions of motherhood by constructing an alternative archive rooted in black women's refusal and/or ambivalence toward mothering and familial intimacy. This thesis centers disparate texts that point to a divergent archive of black motherhood—one that makes space for the exception, for those data outliers, women who stand outside traditional inquiries of

black mothers—for “monstrous” black mothers who express ambivalence and/or refuse to mother altogether. In addition to discussing scholarly texts, I explore personal essays written by black mothers Joanna Clark and June Jordan, the play *Hospice* by Pearl Cleage, and the non-profit report *Say Her Name*. Consequently, building an archive of ambivalence, refusal, and queer desire may not fit neatly into traditional black feminist political projects that stress the differential treatment of black mothers or ones that advocate for protecting and defending black maternity. The collected texts make the case that black feminist discussions around black motherhood must be reformulated beyond the imperative to protect mother and child. Though many women have deep connections to children, black feminists’ heavy focus upon the historic and contemporary devaluation of the black mother-child relationship by society leaves little room for those black women who do not desire to nurture others and/or those that express motherhood to be fraught. Additionally, black feminists’ preoccupation with restoring the mother-child bond fails to consider alternative notions of child-rearing that are not predicated upon black women’s reproductive labor. As such, my project seeks to make space for a diverging archive that can move beyond traditional articulations of mothering and family.

In asking these questions regarding the black feminist theoretical archive on motherhood and my alternative one under construction, I employ Susana Morris’ use of Paul Ricoeur’s concept of “a hermeneutics of suspicion”—an interpretive style that reads against the grain of texts and points to possible tensions, contradictions, and less obvious truths (4). In her study of respectability politics and black women’s literature in the U.S. and the Caribbean in the last decades of the twentieth century, Morris advances that many black women authors such as Gloria Naylor, Alice Walker, Jamaica Kincaid, and Sapphire have created and deployed literary narratives that have challenged dominant discourses that privilege marriage and nuclear family

formations within society. Utilizing a hermeneutics of suspicion, Morris problematizes narrow ideas of familial and intimate bonds and argues that these authors employ ambivalent familial bonds in their stories “...not to highlight ‘Black pathology’ but to underscore the paradox of respectability” (4). By paradox of respectability, Morris notes that characters in her identified texts display contradictions in their relationships with and attempts to negotiate traditional family ideals and values, such as having “...a strong sense of duty and, simultaneously, an active harboring of resentment toward duty” (4). The paradox of respectability creates the contradictions within characters since the striving for respectable bonds is socially encouraged since it is seen as legitimate. Characters, however, may not necessarily want this particular arrangement; have poor experiences pursuing respectable relationships, or may be unable to attain the institution of marriage and nuclear family at all. It is with a hermeneutics of suspicion that I re-read black feminist theoretical works on motherhood and the texts under study. In my reading of black feminist theoretical texts on motherhood, I question the assumptions that prioritize heterosexuality, nuclear family formation, and liberal sentiments of the mother with child. I also use this reading strategy to highlight critical moments in the personal essays and play where black mothers express the problematics surrounding mothering and the institution of motherhood. Importantly, I must note that, like Morris, I do not disregard individuals’ and certain communities’ pursuit of heterosexual marriage and nuclear family formation as they can be meaningful cultural practices. I do, however, challenge the common-sense sentiment that such bonds and practices are and should be the *only* legitimate, *natural* ways for people and societies to be arranged. I am invested in problematizing the limited avenues available for individuals and communities that wish to strive for social and legal acceptance and material security. I am very much attuned to the ways notions of “respectability” and “civility” have structured the

experiences of black women historically and contemporarily. As Morris notes, though striving for respectability can be rewarding for some, for those who fail, "...the possibility of alienation and social stigma" occurs (3). It is for those who fail and may become shunned for their "monstrosity" that I center and make the case for theorizing black motherhood as an ambivalent site.

## 2 CHAPTER ONE

### “I THINK I MADE A MISTAKE”: EXAMINING BLACK MATERNAL AMBIVALENCE IN JOANNA CLARK’S “MOTHERHOOD”

*“Black ladies, the last thing we have to worry about is genocide. In fact,  
we could use a little.”*  
~Clark, “Motherhood,” 1970

Over the years, I have searched for the voices of black Sapphire mothers—murderous mothers, negligent mothers, cold mothers, mothers that left their families, like myself. I have craved their essays with a hunger to know their interiority—their angers, their desires, and their resentments. Hoping to find their voice or a lead to one of their essays in popular black feminist theories, I found passing references regarding such women. Instead, a profound absence structured the majority of my encounters in the literature. The last fifty years of black feminist theoretical scholarship on motherhood has sought to reclaim and revel in maternity, emphasizing its importance for black female empowerment and community survival and/or lamenting black women’s inability to mother due to white supremacist and capitalist exploitation (Davis 1971; hooks 1981, 1984, 2001; Collins 1990, 1994, 2006; Roberts 1998; Gumbs 2010). Amongst the many black feminist essays that espouse mother worship, however, stands Joana Clark’s “Motherhood”—an essay that opens with a black woman admitting that having kids was a mistake. Found in Toni Cade Bambara’s edited collection, *The Black Woman: An Anthology*, Clark’s “Motherhood” predates canonical feminist texts on motherhood, like, Adrienne Rich’s *Of Woman Born* (1976) and Nancy Chodorow’s *The Reproduction of Mothering* (1978) and is an essay that has come closest to the taboo voice in the personal essay form that I have ached to see in print. The polemical statement that prefaces this chapter demonstrates a black mother’s voice that refuses black liberationist prescriptions that hail black women to become the prized wife-



mother subject and a voice that complicates the beloved self-sacrificing maternal subject in black feminist thought. Clark, a black woman, mother, opera singer, and graduate of City College of New York, eschews respectability and tells a black mother's truth that, in Alice Walker's words, is "...cruel enough to stop the blood" (223). Clark expresses an unthinkable position for a black bloodmother, remarking that black women should not worry about government sponsored genocide since, "...in the last hundred years; we've been bravely propagating and all we've gotten are a lot of lumps and a bad name" (85). Motherhood, per Clark, constitutes a detriment to black women's well-being and is an institution within black life that must be reevaluated.

I have searched for similar essays written by black mothers addressed to other black women that call for the reconsideration of the maternal while proposing a radical proposition of denying the propagation of black life. I have not had very much luck so far in finding its iteration. Given that contemporary black feminist discourses treat motherhood as a desirable practice for black women and girls to assume, this chapter centers Clark's essay as an intervening counter narrative. I briefly contextualize Clark's essay in the context of *The Black Woman: An Anthology* during the 1960s and 1970s black liberation movements in the U.S. Through close reading of Clark's personal reflection and feelings, I argue that Clark's ambivalence tasks black feminist theorists to consider the psychological dangers of maternal imperatives that premise black women's self-sacrifice. I further contend that Clark's essay opens up a transgressive space in the personal essay genre for black mothers to express refusal at black cultural imperatives for women and girls to mother and offers a rare but critical text for theorists to rethink black feminist projects of maternal reclamation.

### **A Unique Time for Uniquely Angry Voice(s): Questioning Gender in the Movement Era**

The gender and sexual politics of the U.S. black revolutionary movements of the 1960s and 1970s were repressive, to say the least. Literary critic, Margo Crawford, writes that "Black

men, during the...black freedom struggles.... insisted on the need to connect manhood and blackness” (185). Consequently, black patriarchy became the telos for black liberation. The freedom dreams of black manhood spelled constraint for black women. Jean Bond and Patricia Peery, anthology contributors, observed that black women were told by both black men and women to “...abandon their ‘matriarchal’ behavior, learn to speak only when they are spoken to, and take up positions...ten paces...behind their men” (142). While behind men, many liberationists advocated that black women assume the ‘proper’ place as the honorable wife-mother subject. Amiri Baraka, an important figure in black cultural nationalist circles, elaborated in 1970 that the ideal black woman “...must first be able to inspire her man, then she must be able to teach our children, and contribute to the social development of the nation” (8). Sentiments, like those of Baraka, required *the* black woman to have no qualms with patriarchy; the revolution required her consent. Without her complicity, the quest for black liberation would be thrown into jeopardy. Though many felt that black women’s equality and consciousness-raising threatened the movement, black women still “refused to be subsumed in the black male struggle” (Crawford 185). Anthology editor, Toni Cade Bambara—a writer, story-teller, teacher, filmmaker, and activist—was one such black woman. Bambara refused during an era that Beverly Guy-Sheftall historicizes as black feminist thought’s “Angry Decades” (Guy-Sheftall 1995).

Feeling fed up with the widespread misnaming of black women as overbearing matriarchs and the absence of black women’s literature, Bambara began compiling the anthology. Bambara states that one of the primary reasons for producing the collection was to “...explore ourselves and set the record straight on the matriarch and the evil Black bitch” (6). Bambara further notes that impatience and sense of need produced the work. She writes:

For the most part, the work grew out of impatience: an impatience with all too few and too soon defunct afro-american women's magazines that were rarely seen outside of the immediate circle of the staff's and contributors' friends. It grew out of an impatience with the half-hearted go along attempts of Black women caught up in the white women's liberation groups around the country. Especially out of an impatience with all the "experts" zealously hustling us folks for their doctoral theses or government appointments. And out of an impatience with the fact that in the whole bibliography of feminist literature, literature immediately and directly relevant to us, wouldn't fill a page." (5)

Bambara invited submissions of poetry, short stories, and formal and informal essays from professional writers, never-before-writers, mothers, and students. Notable names like Alice Walker, Audre Lorde, Paule Marshall, Frances Beale, and Nikki Giovanni stand out and other lesser known names occupy the table of contents. All contributors were living black women, which for Bambara provided enough legitimacy for publication and authority to "address themselves to issues...relevant to the sisterhood" (7). Bambara's efforts culminated into a creative and permissive publication space for black women to express and explore "...the interiority of an in-the-head, in-the-heart, in-the-gut region...called the *self*" in a time where dominant discourses of "the black woman" deemed her an emasculating matriarch, a bad mother, and/or a desired race woman and revolutionary mother (Traylor xi). Traylor later writes that the anthology:

discovers a voice by which to ends its own entrapping silence and to end its silencing in the media of traditional and prevailing expressive modes...It refuses the assumptions and terminology of colonial, capitalist, racist, and gendered versions of reality; linguistically,

its aspirations include the subversions of terms that reduce the ever-wide dimensions of the self. In fact, such self-referential terms as *Afracemme* and *womanist* (coined by contributor Alice Walker) liberate the agents of self and world revolutionary thought and change from imposed hegemonic interpretation or labeling. (xi-xii)

Given the freedom to speak from a private and interior space, black women were afforded the opportunity to submit prose writings that expressed unrespectable sentiments regarding black gender and sexual mores and a chance to define themselves and describe their lives on their own terms. The permitted public forum produced what I consider one of the most important texts within the anthology—a text that has both helped me clarify the problematics of motherhood itself within black communities and has given a voice to the black Sapphire mother I desire to hear. That text is the gritty detailed and taboo-filled essay, “Motherhood,” by Joanna Clark.

Clark’s narrative begins with a primal scene—the birth of her first child. As an origin point, Clark takes readers through the beginning moments of becoming a mother subject and shares her insights into her experience of her social awakening as a mother. In her opening paragraph, Clark writes:

My first words as I came from under the ether after I had my son were, ‘I think I made a mistake.’ Unfortunately, since then, and one more child later, I’ve had very little reason to change my mind. This is not to say that children cannot be lovable. It’s not them, it’s all the foolishness that goes on in the name of them. From the beginning, motherhood took on the complexion of a farce. (75)

Clark’s honesty may cause a feeling of discomfort to her readers. Cultural mores dictate that “good” mothers never express any adverse thoughts or feelings towards their children nor

towards their experiences of mothering (Parker 1995). A mother terming the birth of her child as a mistake transgresses cultural ideals of motherhood.

Strikingly, Clark's narrative lacks the sentimental, sweet strokes many expect mothers to paint about their children and their experience of becoming a mother. The first moments of motherhood often begin with scenes of profound connection between mother and child. Like the image of Madonna and child, such scenes have become repeated and mythologized, often providing a sense of naturalness and rightness. Clark's narrative, however, fails to provide readers the affective experience of motherhood as a primary, natural bond between mother and child. For example, Clark never describes any first moments of expressed affection or performed care towards her son, such as holding him. Alternatively, Clark inverts ideals of childbirth by identifying it as a personal site of horror. Clark likens the first moments of motherhood to that of a non-human animal. In a voice of sass, Clark expresses that during birth she was "trussed up like some sort of sacrificial pig" (75). For Clark, the description of herself as a sacrificial pig marks motherhood as a site of indignity and inhumanity; she feels like an animal on her back—a pig nonetheless. The description of sacrifice reflects dominant ideas of women as destined biological producers. For black women, the image of a sacrificial pig invokes the history of black women as non-human breeders. During enslavement, black women were marked as beasts—a valuable, monstrous lot that beget more property, more crops, and more labor. Clark does not find empowerment in the experience of birth. Nor does Clark express the moment as one that reflects popular black feminist sentiments of mothering as a profound experience of transformation into an empowered sense of self, or powerful mother figure. Instead, Clark offers a marginal black woman voice to detail the first moments of a woman entering motherhood with

the image of one prostrate, performing the expectation of maternal sacrifice expected of all women.

Though Clark describes her feelings of indignity around childbirth, she still chooses to breastfeed her son. Readers may expect Clark to express a sentimentalized account of mother and child nurturance, but she transgresses again. Clark de-romanticizes the choice. Clark blithely explains that she decided to "...brew my own rather than to spend the next few months encumbered by a slew of rattling bottles" (75). No descriptions of breastfeeding her son occur after the given reason. Nurturance is absent in Clark's narrative. Readers, assuming that new mothers welcome the care of their newborn, may find Clark cold. As a new mother, Clark does not express interest in the labors of child care. Her descriptions of why she chose to nurse suggest a matter of convenience rather than one about cultivating well-being and connecting to her child. Clark, a Sapphire mother, offers no sweet remarks about the propagation of life, or care work. She is more interested in unmasking the farce of motherhood.

The absence of maternal affection, especially as it relates to Clark's decision to nurse, is profound. Traditionally medical and feminist discourses alike espouse breastfeeding as a quintessential experience of mother-child bonding which include the primary moments of human connection. Susanne Gannon and Babette Muller-Rockstroh observe that the medical industry propagates psychological and moral norms into prescriptions of breastfeeding and premise the "...nearly body-less woman without her own needs and desires" who must subsume her own desires and pleasures into those of her infant (49). Women's bodies become the sole source of nourishing—men's role and other caregivers' roles in care and attachment to children become secondary at best. Many cultural feminists have corroborated the psychological and physical

significance of breastfeeding by reclaiming motherhood as a “source of power and status” (Bobel 782). Motherhood scholar and sociologist, Evelyn Nakano Glenn comments that:

We [feminists] are reluctant to give up the idea that motherhood is special. Pregnancy, birth, and breast-feeding are such powerful bodily experiences, and the emotional attachment to the infant so intense, that it is difficult for women who have gone through these experiences and emotions to think that they do not constitute unique female experiences that create an unbridgeable gap between men and women. (22-23)

Likewise, black feminist theorists have reinforced the notions of women’s emotional attachment to mothering and have lamented black women’s inability to breastfeed their own children throughout U.S. history. Black feminist literary critic, Marlo David, states that given the history of wet-nursing and maternal alienation in black women’s reproductive history, “...depictions of breastfeeding often demonstrate a supreme act of personal autonomy” (46). Essentially, the black mother who nurses “...writes her *self* into being through her claims to motherhood” and often undergo moments of “...heroic maternal self-transformation” (David 46-47). Clark’s explanation to breastfeed challenges medical, cultural feminist, and black feminist accounts of breastfeeding which assume intense emotional attachment and desires to exist on the part of mothers to their children. Clark opts to breastfeed, a choice that arguably should benefit the child. Clark, however, does not believe in sacrificing her desires for the assumed needs of her child nor does she discuss wanting to transform herself into a maternal figure. Clark, simply, does not want to be bothered or bogged down by bottles. Clark’s comfort takes precedence. Clark, by cultural standards, is a strange mother; she articulates a desire to avoid burdens related to the child and a desire that flows toward self.

Clark's essay reflects a deep ambivalence toward motherhood. Clark describes bearing her son as an error, but soon assures her readers that she considers children potentially lovable. The remarks demonstrate a complex set of sentiments towards children and suggest that Clark is not filled with *only* feelings of limitless love and affection. The coexistence of negative and positive feelings within a mother, such as anger and adoration, constitutes maternal ambivalence. Feminist psychotherapist, Barbara Almond, argues that maternal ambivalence, "the mixture of loving and hating feelings that *all mothers* experience towards their children," is ubiquitous (2). Yet, despite its widespread occurrence, society deems its existence as taboo because "...it is unwomanly not to love your children *unconditionally*... [and]...unnatural not to want children in the first place" (7). Though psychoanalytic thought articulates ambivalence as an individual mother's feelings toward her own children, Clark regards her mixed feelings toward the "foolishness that goes on in the name of them" (75). That foolishness is the socially accepted mandate to love and mother unconditionally. Black women often endure "high personal cost[s]...in providing an economic and emotional foundation for their children" (Collins, *Black Feminist Thought* 129). Many black men and women consider such women respectable and honorable; these self-denying women are the "good" women within the race because of their sacrifices to families and communities. Clark's opening rumination, however, deems the cultural expectation of maternal martyrdom an unwanted and asinine social practice.

The expressed ambivalence positions Clark as a monstrous black mother. Clark voices her feelings during an era in which black liberationist movements called for black women to bear and raise the race and public rhetoric that deemed black women "bad" mothers. Clark's ambivalence marks her as the cold, truth-telling Sapphire figure that many black men and women told to be more "feminine and supportive" for the cause while also marking her as a



failed mother (Bambara 204). Declaring birthing her children as a mistake undermines the perfect mother ideal expected of all women; unfaltering nurturance is a feminine prerogative. The perfect mother "...has no negative feelings towards her children, she is constantly loving, patient and available" (Parker 4). Any oppositional feelings about children construct a mother as bad—unfeminine and unnatural, a monster. Additionally, a black mother's admission to feelings of resentment and regret towards children takes on a unique inflection. As Martha Southgate, black mother and writer, shares:

A woman loves her children. That is a given in our society, reinforced at every conceivable turn. And a black woman is the mother to the world. Look at our history—all the babies we've raised. Our own and other people's. By necessity or by choice. A black mother's love is supposed to be uncomplicated, Aretha Franklin-like, it moves mountains. (115)

Black women should be the primordial mother, the limitless and boundless nurturers to all, not just to her own children. As a site of excess, black women are expected to put up and shut up—all while expending their energy towards others. Clark's intimate sentiments, however, lead readers to an uncomfortable truth: maternal expectation for black women is problematic.

Ambivalence permits Clark a space to express not only the "lovable" aspects of motherhood but also the detestable facets. For a black female subject, like Clark, ambivalence can be vital; it can open a space to highlight and negate the excesses of the primordial black mother archetype, which require persistent self-sacrifice of black women. For example, Clark decides not to circumcise her son though the doctors tell Clark it will be best for the child; the doctors even implore her to think of her son's feelings when he realizes he is the only uncircumcised boy. As a "good" mother, Clark should forgo her feelings and follow the cultural

script to care and protect her child. After all, the child's feelings should take precedent over the mother's. Clark, however, shares that she had read that circumcision lessened sexual pleasure; so, she did not want to interfere in her son's sexual life before he could become conscious of decisions regarding his body and sexual pleasure. To readers, Clark's decision could be interpreted as a noble stance for a mother to take to protect her child's bodily integrity and sexual autonomy. Many could also read her decision as one of resistance and Clark as a radical mother—a mother that defies convention and openly discusses and privileges the sexual pleasure of her child. Yet, Clark inserts her primary reason for not choosing circumcision for her son. Clark straight forwardly writes: "Then, I knew me, and I know that the last thing I wanted to do was to take him home and have to deal with a gauze-wrapped, bloody, infection-prone little ding-a-ling" (76). And with a tinge of humor, she adds, "Besides soap and water are plentiful enough in this society so that no one need ever lose a penis to smegma" (76).

Clark's gritty description displays a vivid image of caretaking that she refuses to engage in. The primordial black mother, a site of abundance, would perform the labor of care without complaint. Ambivalence, however, interjects the possibility for an individual black mother to be a site of abundance and a site of lack and refusal. Clark considers children lovable and cares for her son's well-being since she gives him the option to decide what is best for his needs and desires regarding his body. The act places the responsibility of care upon the child instead of leaving it to the mother. As such, Clark's son will be the primary one to navigate the cultural mores and possible responses to his bodily difference; he will have to figure out his feelings, not Clark, his mother. Furthermore, the acknowledgment of her dislike for tending to the "gauze-wrapped, bloody, infection-prone little ding-a-ling" showcases the deplored aspects of the child and his need for care (76). Clark lacks here; she does not own the desire to tend to her son's

body. The faltering of Clark's love and commitment to care for the child's body is crucial. Her wavering of feelings loosens the grip of excessive maternal mandates and creates a moment for Clark to speak against and reject cultural prescriptions of selfless maternal care. The recognition of her distaste for her son's potential need and the required care she will need to perform permits Clark a necessary and forbidden act for a black woman. Clark makes the decision to make her own desires and needs primary—a decision which black liberationist discourses of a “good black woman” deny (75). Overall, Clark's refusal to circumcise her child demonstrates an ethic of care for self that does not require maternal sacrifice nor one that is perpetually beholden to reductive maternal archetypes.

After opting out of circumcising her son, relations tense between Clark and the hospital staff and doctors. Clark's ambivalence towards motherhood becomes more explicit. At some point, the doctors attempt to bypass Clark's desire by asking for her husband's consent to the procedure. Clark's son remained uncircumcised, but the ordeal provides the first lesson in motherhood according to Clark. Naming the ordeal as the first lesson suggests a primary realization and framework to understand black motherhood. Clark states that the first lesson about motherhood is that "You are everybody's whipping boy" (76). The metaphor of the whipping boy can suggest how black mothers are scapegoated for others' problems in larger culture, and can also represent a servant for someone else's punishment. The word "whipping," however, invokes a deeper historic connection to black women's reproductive history in the United States—the maternal history of black women in chattel slavery. The whip, a sign of discipline, of punishment, and even death, rips apart the association of black maternity to black life and sustenance. Black women's bodies have served as sites of death and life—sacred and profound. Clark's utterance of the whip bridges the history of enslavement and black women's

late twentieth century position in political economy. Though black women no longer served as breeders of continuation of slave labor, Clark's noting "you are everybody's whipping boy" in the late twentieth century suggests that black women still occupied a position of powerlessness, that the maternal position remains fraught with codes of servility, to not just white society, but also to black communities. "You are everybody's whipping boy" suggests that black women perform the needs and desires of anyone—men, women, and children. If black mothers are considered everyone's "whipping boy"—a young male at the bequest of another—black women cannot express nor exhibit a performance of self that privileges their needs and desires. For Clark, maternal expectations of black women are a part of an absurd social formation.

Clark further chronicles her experience and feelings of mothering after her time in the hospital. Clark's desires continue to fall outside social norms. For example, Clark recounts her want for daycare. She recalls contacting the Daycare Council, an institution seemingly designated to support those in need of child care. Clark shares that the agent on the line, a woman, expresses shock and feelings of insult when she tells of her need for a nursery because she has to work. Clark recalls the agent saying that, "In New York City there's no such as a mother having to work. You can go on welfare!" (77) The agent guides her to the nearest welfare office and not day care centers. The agent's voice expresses the overall ideal that mothers belong with children at home. Clark interrupts this presumptuous logic. She tells both the agent and her readers that she did not desire to go on welfare not because of its stigma associated with government aid nor because she does not need support. She states: "The last thing I wanted to do was sit around all day in my Lower East Side hovel. I wanted to do something to get out of it" (77). Primary articulations of black women's relationship to work and family emphasize black women's desire and actions toward home and family given the historic denial to make traditional

family structures due to demands of slave labor and paid wage work. Clark expresses a subversive desire, one that diverges from black feminist sentiments toward family and home spaces and traditional feminist calls for women to go beyond domestic spaces and identities.

Clark calls her home a hovel, connecting black women's domestic spaces as insufficient and unfulfilling both materially and emotionally. One could read her desire to "get out of it" as a criticism of the physical space of her home, maybe a willingness and desire to work for a better physical home space and family life, but I imagine Clark wanting to do something outside of traditional articulations of work, home, and family. Clark shares that she is going to graduate school at this particular time in her life. I imagine that this "something" is not be in the house taking care of kids and the household—her desire is not for domesticity and maternal ideals that privilege mothers with children inside a contained home space. Additionally, Clark also later admits that she was hypocritically selling honeymoons while locking the bolt on her "charming, but philandering and non-supporting Peter Pan of a husband" (77). She writes that she was "sporadic" about her job and not selling honeymoons "with total dedication" (78). As a result, she was fired from her job. Clark's descriptions of her fraught home life coupled with her lack of passion at work illustrate a desire for self-fulfillment outside of domestic and work spheres. The reading of her experience opens the possibility of imagining how both ambivalence and refusal can provide a creative imagining of how familial and communal life could look beyond the prescribed structures and ideals espoused by white society and Black Nationalist and feminist calls for black family. For Clark, she calls the solution simple, which would be to have subsidized daycare.

Because meeting black women's needs is a low social priority, Clark's sentiments highlight how motherhood serves as a detriment to black women's well-being. Both the State

and Clark's husband expect black women to care for families and themselves with limited material and social resources. Needing financial support, Clark takes her husband to court. The probation officer determines that her husband can give fifteen dollars a week to which Clark retorts, "What the hell...am I supposed to do with fifteen dollars a week?" (80) The officer tells Clark that she does not have the "proper attitude" about the circumstance (80). Instead of electing the honorable route of "making a way out of no way," Clark offers for her husband to take care of the children along with the weekly fifteen dollars. Shocked and appalled at Clark's suggestion, the probation officer censures Clark: "You can't desert your children. That's against the law...you can't do that! You're their mother" (80). Clark corrects the officer and tells her that she is not abandoning the children, but, in fact, giving them to their father. Clark writes, "People, especially those without children, sometimes have a way of saying 'mother' that I find incredible. They manage to pronounce a halo around it. I supposed if you're in the mood you feel like the Virgin Mary. I wasn't in the mood" (80). The moment reflects cultural and moral disapproval of mothers who leave, even if temporarily, and reflects the black communal sentiment that black mothers must consistently remain the sturdy bridges of familial love.

Unable to give the kids away, Clark shares that "The only really definite thing I could think of to do under circumstances was to nut out" (81). She writes: "All I knew was that I wanted someone to take care of those children while I went off and slept for a couple of weeks" (81). Weeping to a doctor, she confesses that "I can't go on...I'm married to this man who thinks that all you need to live on is a tiny bit of money and love will take care of the rest" (81). The doctor asked what was wrong with that, but Clark shares with the readers that "'Love' is another one of those words like 'mother.' When my husband said 'love,' he meant whatever emotion he could generate in you that would sustain you enough to put up for and with him" (81). Not able

to be hospitalized or receive care from her husband, the doctor offers Clark Librium. Clark soon discloses that she began to imagine herself taking her daughter "...out of the stroller, holding her by the legs, and rattling her against the fence the way you would a baseball bat" (82). Clark does not act on the illicit imagining. Instead, after trying to give the kids up at a police station, she arrives to the Department of Child Welfare, screaming "SOMEBODY'S GOT TO TAKE THESE GODDAM CHILDREN!" (82) Though Clark considers the role of Librium in the haunting image of hurting her daughter, readers should not attribute the detailed visual solely to the prescribed drug. The description of her interior mind not only demonstrates a maternal body hosting violent thoughts toward children but shows the potential dangers that maternal expectation can exact upon black women's psyches and threaten the lives of children as well. Assumptions of black mothers' strengths and self-sacrifice took a toll on Clark. With little care and relief, Clark could have endangered her child.

Clark's verbal expression could corroborate the public sentiment that black mothers are "unfit" as per the Moynihan report. She lacks much of the expected sentimentality of a mother and shares thoughts about hurting her child. Clark's sharing of her messy interior, however, discloses the inequity of distribution of labor towards family and the unreasonableness of motherhood itself. The institution of motherhood disproportionately places childcare responsibilities with the mother even when the individual woman may not be able to take care of herself or others. For black mothers, not only must they take care of children without expectation from paternal participation beyond conception, many must also often raise children "on the lowest possible terms" (84). Faced with lack of child support and unable to care for her own well-being, the imposition of motherhood upon individual black women could result in horrific thoughts and/or acts towards children. As Clark asks, "Where is the equity?" from public

structure and support of black men (84). Without, motherhood induces a precarious state for mothers and children. Importantly, Clark's narrative boldly prompts black women and men to know that mothers will need more than "...a tiny bit of money and love" to survive and thrive in the world and tasks black folks to move beyond the "halo" and "Virgin Mary" images of motherhood (81, 80).

Clark ends her narrative with the memory of her and her husband's relinquishment of the children into foster care. Clark later regains custody of the children and remarries. Looking back on her experience, Clark closes her piece with the perspective that "As mothers, we are worse off than we think we are" (86). Clark tells black women that motherhood may be an important cultural tradition rooted in African heritage. With a sharp tone, however, Clark writes:

We don't need it. If we've got to turn our eyes eastward and rediscover our heritage, let's not get hung up on the hairdos and the dashikis. There are more salient aspects of that culture to adopt. No self-respecting African woman would ever get married without a dowry, without something to back her up if the marriage ran into trouble. (71)

Clark here makes an important intervention in rhetoric that requires black women's maternity and domesticity for black liberation. Clark's "We don't need it." undercuts the discursive hold on black female bodies to reproduce by simply speaking and exercising a denial to the cultural mandate. Clark disavows the notion that motherhood is a natural, biological formation. Instead, she marks motherhood as a selected, cultural practice, placing it in line with black men and women's efforts to return to an African past. Interjecting a discourse of cultural and historical change around black motherhood creates the possibility of re-making current formations of rearing and caretaking. A world that does not require black maternal sacrifice could become not only imaginable, but also realizable.



Furthermore, Clark openly advocates for black women to be independent of men. Given her husband's failure to provide support and the unlikelihood of black men assuming child rearing responsibilities, Clark remains skeptical. For her, the possibility of American black men and women of her time replicating what she considers African cultural practices of female independence and economic safety nets for women is low. As a result, Clark wryly concludes: "...dowries are not too easy to come by, but the pill is" (85). Clark's gesture toward the pill ends her essay on an ambivalent note. The pill halts the propagation of biological life, a threatening proposition to black nation building and civil society. Yet, Clark does not advocate for the wholesale abandonment of black women's mothering; she moves toward conditioning the performance of motherhood by black women. Black women's material reality and health must be secure before, during, and after maternal roles are fulfilled. Her experience highlights to her readers that without critical support, motherhood will continue to be a detriment for many black women.

Clark's essay falls in a tradition of black feminist sentiment that values female economic independence and reproductive autonomy (Hooks 1981, 1984; Collins 1990, 2006; Roberts 1998). Summarizing Clark's narrative as solely a call for liberal reform misses its other radical potentials. Making sure that black women have access to birth control and economic support are necessary political projects, but I think Clark's narrative goes further. Her essay opens the possibility for black mothers to consider exercising refusal to the inequities of black caretaking by subsuming a male privilege: flight. When faced with the discussion of child support, Clark's husband is asked the question of what is his wife to do if not able to take care of the kids. He replies that Clark is "...an intelligent woman...I'm sure she'll think of something" (83). Here, Clark's husband parallels another black man Clark recalls who believes that his partner once out

of a mental institution will come back and get the kids. Clark's husband expresses little concern about his children's necessities for care nor does he, like his nameless male counterpart, seem attached to the responsibilities of their care. Clark's husband successfully relegates matters of rearing and the children's well-being to his wife. Clark interferes in the patriarchal logic and states, "...I was intelligent enough to tell my husband that I would have to defer for a while the pleasure of raising his children. That they were his children as well as mine and therefore I had just as much right to cop out as he did" (83). Clark articulates a transgressive response to her husband's aloof orientation towards his children. Like a man, she displaces childcare elsewhere, away from her body. And, like a man, Clark leaves the family by relinquishing her kids first to their father and then later to the State.

Many in black communities would consider Clark's choice to give up her children a betrayal. Mary Helen Washington notes that in black culture, black women are often viewed as strong black mothers. Black mothers themselves have an image to uphold. Despite the "...harsh responsibilities... [the black mother] accepts and carries [them] out to the fullest of her power" (Washington xx). Black mothers are supposed to be familial stalwarts, and many black women uphold the cultural expectations through their sheer determination to stay despite their ambivalent feelings and their unmet needs and desires (Beauboeuf-Lafontant 2009). The image of the self-sacrificing mother becomes reinforced through black mothers' choices to stay, and the black female body remains trapped by maternal mandates. Clark's betrayal, or her flight from family, opens the possibility of getting out of the stronghold of maternal sacrifice and endurance. Many black mothers find themselves in similar positions to Clark—financially troubled and lacking support from both the State and the men in their intimate lives. Like Clark, black mothers could exercise a choice to not endure, or to "cop out" like the men in their lives. That would be a

difficult choice to make for many black women, and the choice would create a crisis in many families and communities. Clark's narration of her choice leaves readers with a difficult, uncomfortable question: If black women "cop out" of families, who raises the kids? Clark calls for the pill, a troubling proposition for many, but mothers giving up kids, even if temporarily, would provide an even more complex an issue to fathom. Clark may not explicitly call for black women's flight, but her refusal to offer boundless care presents the option nonetheless.

### **Conclusion: Revisiting Clark as a Site for Black Feminist Theorizing of Motherhood(s)**

Unlike anthology counterparts, like Toni Cade Bambara, Paule Marshall, Frances Beale, Alice Walker, Nicki Geovanni, and Audre Lorde, Joanna Clark only has one publication to her name; and outside of the release of the new edition of the *The Black Woman: An Anthology* in 2005, Clark's essay has not been republished. Joanna Clark remains lesser known, and the essay "Motherhood" remains relegated to a past and a less-discussed piece of writing in contemporary theorizing of black motherhoods.

Over the years of this project, I have found few references to Clark's essay. One reference stands out. Allia Matta, an academic and black mother, mentions sharing Clark's experience of emotional breakdown from being unable to take care of her children in her personal essay, "Revolving Doors: Mother-Woman Rhythms in Academic Spaces." Matta tells of her decision to pursue a graduate degree in creative writing while choosing not to be a primary parent to her children. The children's biological father became the primary parent. Matta states that her choice received backlash because the pressures in her black community assumed black mothers to be the primary parent rather than considering alternative models. Matta importantly shares that even though African American communities have relied on non-nuclear familial structures, such as othermothers, community mothers, and extended networks of grandparents,

aunts, uncles, and cousins to rear children, these “...very same communal spaces...perpetuate self-sacrifice and the curtailment of personal aspirations or interests, while foregrounding those of the larger black community” (140). Twenty-first century black mothers, like Matta, can identify with Clark’s sentiments of needing to call it quits and give up. Yet, these black mothers’ feelings and voices rarely make it into traditional publication forms. Given that black feminists have moved towards reclamation of motherhood in literary and scholarly publications over the last half century, articulations of refusal and ambivalence, such as those performed by Clark, remain few and far between. The celebration of the black primordial mother continues and voices of ambivalence and refusal to mother do not fit neatly into black feminist frameworks that celebrate maternal performance, endurance, and sacrifice. As such, ambivalence and refusal primarily remain unwritten or are mentioned in passing—rarely centered or revealed in. Without challenging the fundamental attachment to black mothers as primary caregivers to children and communities, black women, like Clark and Matta—those who choose self as primary, those who choose to pursue their own dreams and personal growth—remain outliers in black feminist discussions of motherhood and outcasts within their own communities.

As another decade of the twenty first century passes, motherhood remains an idealization imposed on all women to aspire to and/or expect. Barbara Almond writes that the “Idealization of motherhood has continued into the present and grown in intensity” with increased calls for attachment style parenting, intensive mothering, and perfect child care practices (5). For black women, in particular, the motherhood imperative continues to demand self-sacrifice for racial survivance. Shari Parks writes that young black girls and women continue to be socialized to nurture, to endure, and to be strong. She recalls:

I was raised to be strong and nurturing. As far back as I can see, so were all the women of my family. We never asked why. The survival of our family and our race seemed enough. In black life, women are the fierce girlies, mamas, and grandmamas who hold together black families and neighborhoods through sheer determination. Folks consider them to be the “backbone” of their families and culture, with “back” being an important operative word. Black females in this country are born into the army of Fierce Angels, and they have no choice in the matter. Membership is required and the expectations placed on them are completely universal; *all* black women are supposed to be strong and selfless. Generations of people—black, white, and just about everybody else—have been raised with the underlying assumption that black women will save them. (Parks xiv)

American culture prescribes child-rearing to be the purview of women. This responsibility takes on a particular inflection when considering black women. Not only must children rely on her, but the entirety of the race depends on her very existence and performance of selflessness. Though I recognize the importance of reproductive labor that black women have and continue to perform, the pattern of expecting black girls and women to save others and not themselves is a problem. Considering the breakdown of extended family networks due to the demands of labor markets and the search for better housing, the circumstances of mothering have become even more difficult for contemporary black women; without social support, the responsibility of child rearing have fallen more upon individual mothers in particular (Almond 5). The circumstances leave black women in a state of not only material precarity but also an emotional one. Black women must figure out meeting their needs and desires with shrinking resources while in community and family settings that call for placing children and others’ needs above their own. As the demands for childrearing and caretaking increase, black feminists must

begin confronting the physical and emotional costs of mothering to black women's well-being and start recognizing the ensuing complex sentiments related to the dominant social formations of care in black life.

Though I find the reclamation of motherhood to be a profound project, black feminists must make space for black women's voices that position mothering and motherhood as life-depriving for self. The Sapphire mother voice should not be repressed or ignored. As Audre Lorde once argued, anger can teach us a thing or two about our experience and its relationship to the social world (127). Sapphire mothers, like Clark, have information in their anger, their criticism, and from their failures to endure. Stories that involve black mothers' ambivalence, anger, and abandonment may instigate discomfort and pain. These narratives and complex feelings, however, could point to a transformation in ethics and practices of care for black life. Who will raise the kids if Sapphire leaves? Various bodies—masculine, feminine, trans, cis, old, young, middle aged will need to step up, step in, and participate in the project of caring for black life from young to old. Without challenging the foundational sentiment that women should mother and the conflation of the maternal with black femininity, the burdens of care will always fall onto the bodies of black women.

Because few publications make space for black maternal ambivalence and refusals, black feminists need to create a genealogy of black maternal monstrosity. Like this chapter, that would mean digging for rare and taboo stories and engaging in a reading strategy that finds potential in black maternal failures and defeats. Doing so means privileging texts written by black women who do not engage in mother worship and prompts a rethinking of maternal imperative for black women. Clark espoused in 1970 that black women should reconsider the mother role and the expectation of women's unconditional performance of reproductive and emotional labor. As

many black women struggle to maintain heavy family loads, it is all the more pertinent for black feminist theorists to begin engaging in a theory that shows the problematics of this gendered relationship and one that can point to gritty and detailed alternatives. To begin, black feminist theorists should return to Joanna Clark's voice in "Motherhood."

### 3 CHAPTER TWO

#### WHEN YOU LOSE YOUR MOTHER: PEARL CLEAGE'S HOSPICE AND THEORIZING BLACK MATERNAL ABSENCE

*“I started down the path of my mother’s life, but somewhere along the way I walked away from it. Where did I go wrong? Or did I go right?”  
~Judy Scales-Trent, “On Turning Fifty,” 1994*

*“You should, Mama. Leave. Get out this house.”  
~Candice Merritt, “Dream Memory,” 2017*

What if maternal love was withheld? I have scribbled this question on a scrap piece of paper taped to my wall next to a cut out excerpt of Clark’s “Motherhood” essay. It is a haunting question. Thinking of Sapphire mothers like Joana Clark leaving the family conjures images of lone black children, abandoned and helpless. The question stirs a sticky unease and obviously so since social mores and structures expect bloodmothers to be primary caretakers. If women abandon maternal responsibilities a crisis in care labor would occur. The thought of maternal absence offers a significant ethical and social quandary to resolve, and I do not want to cast the matters aside lightly. Lives could be at stake. Yet, the initial question does not lead me to consider the desires and needs of the one who left: the mother. Exclusive focus upon the abandoned child buries other inquiries I want to ask: Why would Sapphire leave in the first place? And what can be gleaned from her legacy of absence?

The theoretical archive on black motherhood makes it difficult to consider maternal absence as anything but a horrific and psychologically damaging circumstance. Undoubtedly, history has left black feminists with a troubling legacy of maternal absence. Black maternal absence meets its creation in violent force—beginning with the severance of the continental motherline—the loss of “mother” Africa. The byproduct of trade meant the rupture of kin



systems and cultural customs. The byproduct of theft meant separation of mothers from children. The history of commodification and transformation of black bodies into cargo—a thing to be purchased, sold, exchanged—stirs feelings of dis-ease at the idea of black mothers without their children. In addition to historic weight, black maternal absence continues in slavery’s afterlife.

Saidiya Hartman writes:

Slavery [has] established a measure of man and a ranking of life and worth that has yet to be undone...black lives are still imperiled and devalued by a racial calculus and a political arithmetic that were entrenched centuries ago. This is the afterlife of slavery—skewed life chances, limited access to health and education, premature death, incarceration, and impoverishment. (6)

Black feminist scholars continue to recount how the legacy of maternal absence continues post-slavery. Black life is still expendable. After the culprits of colonization, enslavement, and domestic labor, now practices of mass incarceration and a corrupt social welfare state continue to sever black families and keep black mothers from tending to their own homes and children.

These structures undeniably produce longing and mourning in many descendants of the Middle Passage and I do not condone their existence. I also recognize that mother loss (or lack) can be particularly acute for those who expect and count on the physical and emotional labor that maternal presence may provide (or should provide depending on whose opinion). Archival mourning, however, obscures black female subjects who bore a child and desire and choose to leave nor does the archive consider the queer potential of her leaving.

For this chapter, I follow Saidiya Hartman’s lead by examining the less respectable truths about mothers and thinking through the possibilities that can be drawn from losing a mother. In *Lose Your Mother*, Hartman, looking for her long lost ancestors, had to accept her melancholia

and dispel captive dreams of a Pan-African mother embracing a “sable race standing shoulder to shoulder” (6). For Hartman, mother Africa was her own kind of monster that practiced her own matters of power and hierarchy and ejected her children like strangers. Africa was full of a “...rapacity of African elites [and] the territorial expansion of strong states” that was met and mixed with the “...greed, cruelty, and arrogance white men possessing the world” (103). Though not able to repair the wound of loss, Hartman observes that captives and their progeny made possibilities out of dispossession that are not pathological. She writes:

...enslaved Africans sustained, amended, and abandoned the customs, manners, and proclivities of the Old World. They created a new language out of the language they had known and the languages foisted upon them. They danced the old dances for new purposes. They built dwellings like the ones in which they had lived with new materials. They remembered and renamed old gods and invented and adopted new ones. Cleavage—the separation from and clinging to the Old World—gave rise not only to dispossession but as well to a new set of possibilities. (Hartman 97-98)

This chapter takes up black maternal monstrosity and black maternal absence in the 1987 one act play, *Hospice*, written by Pearl Cleage. *Hospice* features two characters, a black mother and daughter named Alice and Jenny. The play centers on a dialogue that takes place over the span of a day between Alice and Jenny twenty years after Alice’s decision to leave her husband and daughter to pursue her dreams of being a poet in Paris during the 1960s. Alice, now dying from cancer, has returned to her childhood home while Jenny, a black film critic on the brink of labor, has also unexpectedly come back home after leaving her husband. As both characters face life-altering events, Cleage’s play acutely inspects a taboo subject in black communities: maternal desertion. I have chosen to focus on this text because it not only explores the topic of

maternal abandonment, but also because it makes space for a transgressive mother's voice that privileges self-survival over others' well-being. Through a close reading of Alice's characterization and expressions, I view Alice as the monstrous mother who chose self over child, a mother who chose her passion and growth over duty. I view Jenny as a longing daughter who aches for a perfect mother that shows love and guidance and as an inheritor of a legacy of maternal absence. By centering the black mother-daughter relationship, Cleage highlights the demands and desires of the social (the daughter) placed upon black women (mother) and their bodies and being. Through Jenny's longing for Alice to be the mother she never had, I contend that *Hospice* talks back to the expectation and celebration of maternal sacrifice performed by black women by narrating defeat and not endurance. By foregrounding the words and expressions of a black bloodmother who chose to leave her child and family, Cleage opens a portal to a black maternal interiority that makes maternal desertion a legible act of black female survival. Furthermore, I argue that if one can push through the pains of mother loss, black maternal absence can provide a queer roadmap for black female freedom, one that it is not bound to self-sacrifice but rather the pursuit of pleasure and self-growth.

### **Crafting a Perverse Image: The Absent Black Mother**

As a creative production, *Hospice* in comparison to sociological texts practices less constraint when it comes to interrogating black motherhood and therefore features a black mother character that discusses her decision to leave the family and a personal voice that exhibits maternal ambivalence and refusal. Since the turn of the twentieth century, black women playwrights, beginning with Alice Childress, have carved a tradition of exploring racial and gender matters in the genre of theatre (Hutchinson 2004). Cleage, a black feminist essayist, novelist, poet and playwright, continues this tradition in her work as she writes extensively about

sexism and domestic violence within black communities. Cleage produces for a black women audience and exhibits a mission to confront the hard truths of black women's lives despite how white society, black men, and even some black women who are wedded to respectable notions of black maternal duty may view her and her work. Cleage does not aim to engage in a politics of respectability. When asked about the failure to talk about matters related to sexuality among black female communities, Cleage openly acknowledges that:

I think that we have a real problem talking honestly about our sexuality: about what we do, about what we wish we were doing, about what we like, about what we don't like...when you look at our history as black women in this country, you certainly can understand our reticence to talk openly about sexuality because we were used as sexual objects and as breeders for such a long time during slavery. (Chideya 2005)

Citing black women's history of enslavement, Cleage is acutely aware of the constraints upon black women to talk amongst themselves about their personal feelings and opinions regarding sexuality, which encompass significant matters of our bodies—sexual preferences, reproduction, and motherhood. Cleage, a self-described daughter of a Black Nationalist family and feminist, comments that racism and sexism have caused black women to not publish in the realm of non-fiction, such as the sharing of journals or the writing of memoirs. She shares that black women have feared emotional and economic backlash, remarking that “After slavery ended, black women continued to put forward the idea that we were good, sexually responsible women, going up against the racist stereotypes that came out of the madness of slavery” (Sanders 2014). In what she terms as her aim to accomplish free womanhood, Cleage commits to telling the truth to audiences. As she states, “I'm going to tell the truth to whoever is in the room” (Sanders 2014)

and “If people are uncomfortable in the face of truth, they have some work to do on themselves—as do we all!” (Mims and Cleage 2016).

Cleage, eschewing public reproach, constructs what many may consider a perverse mother figure and an unlikely black mother image in black women’s fiction: the absent mother. Acknowledging the ambivalence that many mothers may feel, Ama Wattlely comments that, “While it may not be uncommon for a mother to think about leaving her children and reverting back to the life she led before motherhood, most mothers stay” (12). Speaking on the common representation of the black mother in black women’s literature, Mary Helen Washington notes that despite her “...harsh responsibilities... [the black mother] accepts and carries [them] out to the fullest of her power” (Washington xx). The character of Alice diverges from both social expectations and black literary imaginations, especially since Alice leaves to pursue her passion of poetry and not because of extenuating circumstances that plague many black women, like poverty and/or abuse.

Much like other twentieth-century black women writers, Cleage engages what Susana Morris names as a “hermeneutics of suspicion” toward family. Morris observes that a politics of respectability has served as a sociopolitical strategy deployed by blacks in the U.S. and Caribbean to gain full citizenship and upward mobility (and has improved the lives of few). The strategy itself, however, is “...also a politics of surveillance and repression that seeks to control Black women’s bodies and render them pliant, obedient colonial subjects—and ultimately estranges Black women from one another” (Morris 47). Particularly for black mothers, notes Morris, fulfilling respectable notions of motherhood requires black mothers to train their daughters in “young lady business”—a respectability discourse prescribed for Caribbean women and girls—as seen in the maternal figure of Mrs. John in Jamaica Kincaid’s novel *Annie John*.

Like Mrs. John, black mothers throughout the African Diaspora must “collude with colonialism” by raising their daughters, like Annie, to “...make [them] ‘fit’ to be a bourgeois wife and mother someday” while also learning to work hard to survive in a hostile world (46). This means black mothers must police their own and their daughters’ bodies to fit into hegemonic ideologies and narrow confines of being and must learn to subordinate their own needs and desires while also teaching their daughters likewise. Such maternal undertakings can engender tension between black women and daughters. Because aspiring to be respectable can be difficult, if not impossible for many blacks, argues Morris, a confounding sense of valences can arise. Feelings of repulsion and desire for closeness to family can occur as seen with Annie and her ambivalent feelings towards her own mother (Morris 46). Annie simultaneously desires her mother to be attentive like she was when she a little girl, a nostalgic imagining, while also spurning her mother because of her impositions upon Annie to be a good lady. Though many literary critics focus on the sentiments and struggles of daughters who seek freedom from their mothers, like Morris I diverge from reading practices that privilege daughters’ emotive responses and concerns. As Morris contends, critics must read against the grain to think of not only daughters’ emotions and experience but also focus on mothers themselves.

Cleage deploys an estranged mother-daughter relationship to highlight familial ambivalence and emphasizes the costly performance of maternal duty held by overall society and within black communities that expect mothers to self-sacrifice and endure. As such, Cleage does not solely deploy an ambivalent maternal figure that owns a “...sense of duty and simultaneously, an active harboring of resentment toward duty” (Morris 4). Instead Cleage presents a black mother character that “...was prepared to admit defeat” and one who failed to work towards the survival of her family or community (156). Cleage locates black women’s

struggles for freedom by contesting the role of motherhood itself. She introduces audiences to Alice—a black wife who leaves her community activist husband and a black mother who leaves her then ten-year-old daughter, Jenny.

Described as irritable and sarcastic, Alice fails to perform and embody an affect of care expected of mothers. Alice exemplifies a self-centered kind of being primarily concerned with her growth and now her own death. Not expecting her daughter to return home, Alice does not express interest in getting to know Jenny after twenty years of absence nor does she desire to know her forthcoming granddaughter. Alice openly tells Jenny that she does not want her in the house because she perceives Jenny’s yearning for intimacy as too demanding upon her psyche and body. Alice does not engage in self-sacrifice or expend the energy that Jenny wants; Alice expresses to Jenny that “I’m dying, Sister. I’m only forty-seven years old and I’m dying. I don’t have the energy to figure out what you need to know and tell it to you” (131). Alice tells Jenny that, “You’ve been sitting around with that hopeful look on your face ever since I got here. You want too much, Sister” (131). Although Alice tells Jenny that she does not have the energy to be the mother she desires, Jenny’s yearning for a maternal Alice persists. Jenny states that she wants “to make the best of it” for the remaining weeks they have left of Alice’s life (13). Alice, however, perceives such a process as taxing. Alice tells Jenny that she came to look for “...a hospice, Sister. A place to die in peace, not in pieces” (130). Alice wishes to remain intact and not perform the emotional labor of intimacy and reconciliation that Jenny desires.

Significantly, Alice does not refer to Jenny in sweet or diminutive monikers that often describe a mother to her child. Alice does not call Jenny girl, child, baby, or sweetie. Alice’s referral to Jenny as a “sister,” serves a discursive refusal to interpellate Jenny as her daughter—a relationship that obligates Alice to perform maternal affect and care towards a child. As “sister,”

Alice can refuse to perform maternal duty and permit herself the freedom to share the truth of what matters to her: her own body and her own desires—no one else’s. Arguably, performing maternity may impede Alice from making her needs and desire primary and known to her progeny. Cleage describes Jenny as stung and hurt at her mother’s refusal to try to get to know Jenny after twenty years of absence. Jenny asks Alice what matters to her. Alice replies, “My own heartbeat. The way my blood feels rushing through my veins. The parts of my body that are going to start hurting again in a few minutes. All of that matters” (143). Though Jenny desires to know her mother, Alice gives voice to her needs, pains, and worries—feelings that the daughter-child, Jenny, and society, may not want voiced by their own mothers or from black women altogether. As Alice tells Jenny, a child never wants to hear that they are not the center of their mother’s world.

Moreover, Alice not only fails to perform maternal sacrifice expected of black women, but she also refuses the maternal role altogether. Aware of the ideal black mother, Alice calls out a myth that Jenny may cling to. She tells Jenny:

You want to make a fairy tale out of it! You want me to tell you the secret of life and give you my motherly blessing. You want me to make up for twenty years of silence in two weeks. You want the two of us to play mother and daughter. (131)

Cleage characterizes Jenny as “hurt and angry” after Alice’s statements (131). Jenny retorts to Alice that “We *are* mother and daughter! (*Frustrated and confused.*) This is crazy! This doesn’t make any sense” (131). Alice’s reference to playing “mother and daughter” illustrates a performance of familial relations, suggesting that mothers and daughters are not naturally occurring relationships between women and girls but rather cultural constructs that can and cannot be followed. Alice’s voice suggests that familial relations are not fixed in spite of Jenny’s



emphasis that they *are*. For Alice, the playing of mother and daughter illustrates a detachment and denaturalization of the idealized bond between mother and child. As such, Cleage shares a maternal voice that premises a perverse, or non-normative, perspective on the assumed connection between birthmothers and their children. The bond may not be so natural or intense after all.

In crafting a truth-telling figure, Cleage engages in an excavation of the truths of our mothers' lives which can be "cruel enough to stop the blood" (Walker 1983). For Jenny, the search to know her mother induces pain at the reality that the mother desired—a woman who always loves and tends to her child even when she feels like she is at her wits' end—is a myth, a fiction that many mothers take up and embody and some do not. Cleage unmasks this myth through Alice, but Jenny would much rather prefer to repress the cruel truths of her mother and take pleasure in stories of her birth (a brief moment that Alice divulges to Jenny). Jenny's desire for fantasy suggests that she wants to replicate cultural narratives that make little room for maternal ambivalence. While engaging in Lamaze breathing exercises to lessen the pains of contraction, Alice asks Jenny why she is controlling her breathing. Alice queries:

Alice: What is that supposed to do? ....

Jenny: It's supposed to minimize pain during labor. Redirect your energy or something.

Alice: It's not your energy you're going to be concerned about. Trust me.

Jenny: No horror stories please! I can't stand it when people tell a pregnant woman horror stories, especially when I'm the pregnant woman! (126)

This scene serves as the first moment in which Alice cautions Jenny regarding the plights of motherhood. Jenny stops her mother from elaborating any further on what horrors await. Jenny's abrupt intervention to not tell "horror stories" represents a much larger cultural silence around

the costliness of mothering. Dominant narratives of mothering, including black feminist theoretical narrations of motherhood as one of sacrifice and endurance fail to account for how some black mothers may want to opt out of maternal structures that subordinate their needs and desires—such popular narrations relegate mothers like Alice to the margins. Alice’s voice is too taboo; and Jenny, like many in black communities, would prefer black mothers to not express their unhappiness with the mothering enterprise. Jenny replicates this elision and silence from these marginalized maternal truths and experiences. Jenny notes her mother’s pain and suggests that she takes pain pills for management. Alice responds that “I’m not myself when I take something” (125). Jenny tells her “Then, by all means, take two” (125). While un-medicated, Alice is an unrestrained, honest creature that makes Jenny uncomfortable. Jenny does not want to hear her mother’s voice that speaks of death nor one that wants to tell the non-fairy tale stories of motherhood.

Listening to the monstrous mother’s horror stories, however, is crucial. Examining Alice’s sentiments offers insight into the problematics of being wife and mother for black women. Though from the outside Alice had the ideal familial structure and embodied proper black womanhood—respectable wife of a civil rights leader and mother—these structures did not permit her to realize her own dreams. Alice was too confined, and Alice reveals a kind of death that she was experiencing as mother and wife which the black feminist theoretical archive of mothering fails to take up. Querying why her mother left, Alice tells Jenny that “There was a voice screaming inside my head, Sister. After awhile, the only thing that mattered was to make her stop shouting” (152). Jenny probes if that voice ever considered taking her. Alice replies with “She [the voice] told me to go! She never considered you at all” (152). Alice’s honesty pains

Jenny and in the climax of the play, Jenny and Alice exchange an argument in which Alice divulges her reason for leaving. The scene unfolds:

Jenny: You left me!

Alice: I did not see my future as the dedicated wife of the charismatic leader, dabbling in a little poetry, being indulged at cultural conferences and urged to read that one about the beautiful brothers and sisters in Soweto, or Watts, or Montgomery, Alabama. I couldn't just be that. The world is bigger than that. The world inside my head is bigger than that. Even now...I used to watch your father at rallies and in church on Sunday morning, and he'd be so strong and beautiful it was all I could do to sit still and look prim in my pew. But he was committed to the 'movement.' He didn't have time anymore to lay in bed with me and improvise. I'd been a wife since I was seventeen and here I was almost thirty, with a ten-year old daughter, trying to convince your father to let me publish some love poems! But he couldn't, or he wouldn't. The kind of love he had to give me now didn't allow for that. And I couldn't do without it. So I left. Not much of a story is it?

(155)

In addition to sharing how she could see no future in wifehood to a man who ate her poetry and failed at providing sexual pleasure, Alice also expresses that after the birth of Jenny, she had no time for her own need to express and write poetry. Jenny argues that Alice could have taken her, but Alice admits that she could not stand to look at Jenny (155). Jenny contests that she did not have a choice in the matter, and Alice retorts that:

Alice: Neither did I, Sister. Neither did I. I've spent my life trying to heal a hurt I'm not supposed to have. I got so tired of being trapped inside that tiny little black box. No air, Sister. I couldn't get any air. Everybody was mad at somebody, or about something. (A

beat.) My mother spent her life catching the bus downtown to The Anis Fur Company. Sitting there in that hot little back room sewing purple silk linings in rich white ladies' sable coats. I went there with her once when I was little. There must have been thirty black women in a room smaller than this one. It was hot and dusty and close. I felt like I was smothering. (A beat.) No air, Sister. No goddam air. (156)

The “tiny black box” in Alice’s exposition serves as a motif of death. For Alice, the tiny black box could refer to the domestic life with her husband and child—a life that included a husband who blocked her from publishing love poems and a child who blocked her from writing. It could also describe the experience of playing “exotic other” in France. Alice tells Jenny that she learned that Paris was not different from the West Side of Detroit. Alice, seeking freedom, still had to confront gendered racism in Paris and did not necessarily find the fulfillment she desired. The “tiny black box” describes a web of spaces where racism and sexism confined her choices of freedom as a black woman domestically and internationally. Arguably, Alice was experiencing a kind of self-death, a denial of not just creativity, but a full sense of self and growth. Alice describes the experience as suffocating which makes the box sound like a coffin. Importantly, Alice connects the suffocating domesticity to her mother’s work outside of home. Alice’s mother, a laborer in a “little back room” sewing for consumption of white women alongside thirty black women also felt “smothering” to Alice. The parallel sensations connect black women’s domesticity and motherhood to the taxing experiences of wage-labor documented in black women’s history. Significantly, the connection positions black motherhood in the alienating labor experiences outside of home. The connection could promote different sets of questions for black feminist theorizing on the realm of the maternal and domesticity. Thinking of Alice’s interiority and her sensation of death, black feminist theorists must reconsider their

articulation of the domestic space as the least oppressive sphere for black women and girls and, at minimum, should think of mothering as a barrier to black women's freedom and well-being.

For black mothers like Alice and Joanna Clark, both work (wage labor) and home (domesticity and mothering) are spaces that are not rewarding. Both of their desires flow elsewhere. Like Joanna Clark, Alice's desires flow toward self, but no institution or community supports her desire for expressions and love nor is there any social support for leaving the family as seen in Alice's circumstance. For this, Alice says she is paying penance and that loneliness is the fallout from the choice, not the choice itself. Cleage contests the rhetoric of choice and instead emphasizes the lack of pathways for black women to explore their desires for creativity and self-growth. As a result, Cleage makes way to consider maternal desertion a viable act for black women's survival from a slow-death of endurance.

Overall, Jenny's desire to know the truth of her mother mirrors many black feminist recovery projects of motherhood. Who were black feminist mothers and foremothers? What happened to them? And what did they do? In Jenny's desire and search for a mother, she finds no mother at all—she continually finds “Acid Alice” (127). The struggle to find a mother hurts and frustrates Jenny as she tries to recover from mother loss. Unhappy that her mother fails to demonstrate interest in the woman that she has become nor the grandchild she is about to bear, Jenny demands, “Why can't you just be mother for once and not some world-weary, wisecracking, black caricature of a cynical ex-patriot?” (153) Alice retorts that, “I am being your mother. This is what your mother is, Sister. A world-weary, wisecracking black caricature of a cynical ex-patriot” (154). Alice refuses to mother Jenny in the way she desires. Jenny cannot find a dutiful, loving mother nor the woman she may have imagined in photographs or in the books of her mother's poetry. Alice is simply an individual black woman who had few choices to express

and pursue the freedom and happiness that she desired. Alice risked; and the fallout was loneliness and a regretful forty-seven-year-old dying from cancer. The discovery can be quite painful and disappointing for Jenny, and illustrates that black feminist daughters may not necessarily find the desired mother figures if the full truth of mothers' lives is to be considered. A full, honest examination and search for the hard truths of black women's lives could lead black feminists astray from the maternal—into territories of women who bore a child and left, into territories and legacies of absences, like those created by Alice. Black feminist theorizing on motherhood will need to ask: who is the Sapphire mother that left child and what possibilities can arise from her failures and her absence?

I find Cleage's Alice to be a fruitful subject for black feminist theorizing. Her failing to play mother and daughter to Jenny and her forthcoming granddaughter refuses to perpetuate patriarchal mothering and black feminist idealizations of maternal sacrifice. The choice to become a poet in France resists the restrictive gender-sexual trope of the "lady" that black communities have required of women. Alice is a selfish creature who makes very little room to give emotional or physical nurturance to her kin while saving her energy to tend to her own needs and body. For these reasons, Alice is a transgressive figure of refusal. Her actions permit black women with children to problematize cultural expectations of self-sacrifice and consider forgoing mothering in pursuit of their passion and pleasure which Alice articulates as necessary for life. Her actions also produce questions around the role of men and the meaning of fathering. Alice may seem unforgivable for leaving, but audiences must remember that Alice did not leave Jenny alone. She left her in the care of her father at home, but he, too, created a sense of abandon in Jenny's life. Her father sent her off to boarding school and he remains an absent figure

throughout the play. I consider Alice's leaving as sparking an opportunity for re-imagining caretaking beyond practices of women's work and a chance to politicize male abandonment.

Additionally, black mothers like Alice can create a possible gender crisis in black family and communal life. Black maternal absence can fail to reproduce normative gender prescription. The place of the mother serves as a foundational point to reproduce proper femininity and social-role training for daughters. Under Freudian psychological accounts on human development, a child needs a mother to develop a distinct personality whom the child must learn to be the individual human in western thought. Though psychoanalytic theory's subjects of study are not black, nor black women for that matter, the expectations of the maternal are still expected and desired as black daughters are "...heirs apparent to the halo of motherhood" (Wade-Gayles 8). Collins furthers that "...girls establish feminine identities by embracing the femaleness of their mothers. Girls identify with their mothers, a sense of connection that is incorporated into female personality" (Collins, 1987, 6). Collins' work highlights the inflection of social role training from black mothers and daughters. She argues that black mothers instill a sense of Afrocentric understanding of motherhood which incorporates work and provision as part of mothering and makes space for communal understandings of mothering and responsibility. Additionally, for black mothers, the mother (or fictive mothers) must also instill knowledge on how to both survive and resist oppression and must prepare them for the expectation for work and significant caretaking duties of others either as bloodmothers and/or as othermothers.

Maternal absence for black feminists bears heavy emotional and material weight. What would happen if black women and girls did not play mother and daughter like Alice and Jenny? Who will raise and ensure the survival of a population of people devalued in a nation-state? Who will mother and gender black beings? Audience can see a gender crisis with Jenny. As an

inheritor of maternal absences, Jenny expresses not knowing how to be a lady or wife from her mother. In recounting the final years of Alice's own mother who began losing her memory, Alice recalls her mother, described as "prim," teaching her feminine propriety. Alice shares: "She used to tell me that only women who wore big gold hoops in their ears were gypsies or prostitutes" (Cleage 135). To the anecdote, Jenny expresses, "God! I wish I knew what those things were!" Alice replies that "Oh you know, Sister. The right way and the wrong way of doing things. What makes a 'lady' and what does not" (Cleage 136).

There is a radical potential in this crisis. Alice provides Jenny freedom to make her own choices in life, to make her own kind of self outside traditional bounds of black womanhood and even the possibility to become her own mother—a figure that can nurture her own sorrows and dreams and make her needs primary. Alice shares that she has made no evaluations on Jenny. She states, "I have drawn no conclusions. I have made no judgements. You are free to do whatever you please" (153). Jenny notes that doing whatever you please, like Alice, came with a price. Alice reminds her that "We all have to pay for something" (153). The possibilities for Jenny can be terrifying and exciting. No maternal guide does not have to mean lack of survival—it could mean you go astray and become different. Jenny is onto the possibility of remaking the being and meaning of woman. At one moment of the play, Jenny shares that she is "...trying to create a portrait of 'the new woman.'" (127). There is not much more mentioned in the play about who the 'new woman' Jenny is in the process of constructing. Alice questions the existence of such a subject, asking Jenny "Is there such a creature?" (127) Jenny shares that she has attended conferences dedicated to the new woman and has read articles and novels written by this woman. Jenny's search for a new woman can include Alice's model of absence—Alice's



absence can serve as a map to black female insurrection and freedom despite the costs, offering a different model of black female social subject.

In spite of the longing, the lack of maternal continuity can lead Jenny to building an alternative road map to self-survival and autonomy. By critically examining the absence of her mother (her potential motivations and desires), Jenny can choose to not embody the costly expectations of the maternal. Such a choice could lead to not bearing children at all as seen with Kincaid's Xuela in *Autobiography of My Mother*. Cleage's character Jenny is in the beginning process of labor and occupies a more liminal space. Jenny faces a significant crossroads of a decision: to play mother and daughter to her coming child or not. Jenny is planning to keep the child, but the question of mothering remains; and that decision could be costly to the well-being of Jenny's self. Cleage hints at the potential dangers that can transpire should Jenny become the "ideal" mother that she may imagine through detailed descriptions prior to the play's opening. Cleage describes Jenny and Alice in separate spaces. Both commencing a journey of transition, Alice is on the cusp of death, and Jenny on the edge of birth. Both of their transitional states introduce additional struggle to the characters' arcs. Cleage details the struggle that Jenny experiences as she attempts to write:

...leans back to her work and is suddenly irritated by the fact that her very pregnant belly keeps her from getting as close to the table as she wants to. It is awkward. She tries turning sideways which means she has to type across her stomach. This is even more awkward. She tries several more approaches, but nothing works. (121)

The description can illustrate the beginning struggles to materialize the desires of self that mothering may impede. This struggle for self-sustenance is later emphasized by Jenny when she shares with Alice that she cannot sleep because "...after awhile, she [the baby] gets so heavy, I

feel like I'm smothering" (123). Understandably, the physical and physiological changes of pregnancy can be demanding on the body. The descriptions of disturbance to the creative and smothering parallel Alice's description of suffocation in home and work spaces. Listening to her own mother's maternal experience, Jenny can begin asking herself tough questions: Do I want to be a mother at all? What costs will I incur if I choose to be the ideal mother of sacrifice, like my own before she left? If I do not want to embody this model, what kind of mother would I like to be?

In the end, Alice supplies Jenny with an important lesson before dying: "Don't fool yourself" (159). Those three words are Alice's last lines (and perhaps the final words of her life) and they end the play's production. Alice repeats this phrase several times to Jenny throughout their exchange. This phrase can embody several not-so-sweet truths around black mothering. The phrase is cautionary for black women and particularly daughters. Alice's mantra echoes a similar sentiment for Clark when she directly addresses black women that "As mothers, we are worse off than we think we are" (Clark 86). In truth-telling fashion, Alice and Joanna Clark's words reflect that mothering can be no fairy tale story. Alice's experience illustrates to Jenny that maternal expectation and demands can stunt the self because you may not have time for your joys and your own sustenance if your fulfillment is not raising a child and being a wife. Alice's departure can also permit Jenny the knowledge that motherhood may not be as rewarding as expected—and that a mother may also become angry, bitter, resentful, regretful, and frustrated. Thus, the phrase permits Jenny to know that it may be okay to feel ambivalent and, at the very least, choose yourself at times. Jenny is further along the crossroads of deciding to become a mother and is already having trouble writing. Jenny will have to decide how to meet her own needs and whether she can maintain an intact self that does not fall to the wayside. Alice chose survival of

self; her desertion could teach Jenny that “poetry is not a luxury”—that, in fact, writing will be absolutely as necessary as breath (Lorde 1984).

### **Conclusion: A Theory that Looks Elsewhere**

This chapter suggests that black feminists can and should look elsewhere by considering black maternal failure and absence as productive for black female survival and freedom. The failed perpetuation of black motherline, or the socialization of black girls to become self-sacrificing maternal figures for their family and communities, troubles black communities that count on black women’s reproductive labor which encompasses performing immense care responsibilities for familial and communal survival. Black girls learn to anticipate carrying the burden of individual, familial, and communal survival. Yet, this chapter illustrates that fulfilling this expectation can be costly to self if we can move beyond daughterly mourning and longings for the absent mother. As such, maternal absence can lead black women and communities out of the costs of maternal expectations through models of failed or absent mothering. Alice’s consistent suspicion and questioning of Jenny’s desire for her to be a mother alongside her expressed desire for survival and freedom illustrates a model that privileges a black woman self, and privileges a model that troubles the expectation of sacrifice for black women. Black feminist theorists who encounter figures like Alice and Clark, face a territory of pain and trauma—a space where the maternal may not be worshipped nor should. Alice’s absence, though painful, could be beginning seeds of an experiment that Spillers had in mind with Sapphire.

#### 4 CHAPTER THREE

### “NO, GODDAMAIR”: THEORIZING BLACK MOTHERHOOD AS A SITE OF BLACK WOMEN’S DEATH

Alexia Christian. Mya Hall. Gabriella Nevarez. Miriam Carey. Shantel Davis. Malissa Williams. Sharnel Edwards. Kendra James. LaTanya Haggerty. Sandra Bland. Shelley Frey. Margaret LaVerne Mitchell. Eleanor Bumpurs. Kathryn Johnston. Alberta Spruill. Danette Daniel. Frankie Ann Perkins. Tanisha Anderson. Michelle Cusseaux. Pearlie Golden. Kayla Moore. Shereese Francis. Tyisha Miller. Natahsa McKenna. Kyam Livingston. Sheneque Proctor. Rekia Boyd. Aiyana Stanley-Jones. Tarika Wilson. Meagan Hockday. Janisha Fonville. Aura Fossier. Yvette Smith. Duana Johnson. Nizah Morris. Daniel Holtzclaw. Ernest Marsalis. New Jersey 7. Denise Stewart. Rosanna Miller. Alesia Thomas. Sonji Taylor. Patricia Hartley. Constance Malcom. Jajai Rice. Tasha Thomas...Korryn Gaines...Chareleena Lyles... ..

This chapter begins with the names of the dead, the names of those sentenced to death, and the names of those who have witnessed death. I cannot write them all—the names and the nameless—the black women lost between the ellipses. It is a shame that I do not know the ones that came before. And it is a damn shame that there will be more.

Strangely, I fell asleep after reading the names and seeing the faces of the dead presented by the African American Policy Forum’s May 2015 brief titled “Say Her Name: Resisting Police Brutality Against Women.” That night I dreamed that I was with my father’s family, a group of people I seldom see aside for annual holiday gatherings and funerals. The occasion was a marital anniversary between my grandmother and grandfather who are now deceased. My family and I were at a nice restaurant. It was my family’s way of doing it up—a reserved section in a small dining hall with red carpet, peppered with small gifts encased by cheap tissue paper. No gold. No

diamonds. Not even the most upwardly mobile uncles, aunts, or cousins have made it that far for such lavish purchases. Of course my family's aspirations for grandeur were foiled; our reservations got mixed up and it cost our family more in shame than it did in money to get the issue fixed. I recall moving back and forth to figure out where I needed to be and taking the gifts to and from different parts of the restaurant. One of those gifts I carried was the heaviest; it was a large, gold baroque style picture frame, wrapped and unseen. I think it was a photograph of my grandparents forcing smiles together. I imagined them royally: My grandfather standing strong—a stoic, commanding patriarch—decorated in his well-starved army attire—and my grandmother sitting, hovered over by her husband. I imagined her looking bright, wearing white—a solemn looking bride. The ground suddenly started shaking and a sharp pain hit my head. I collapsed. I looked up and I was transported to my birth home. The house had begun to fall over. It fell onto its side like it got too tired of standing upright. I struggled to get on my feet and when I finally looked up I was back at the restaurant—my family properly seated now chattering, my mother occupying the center of the table, and me still holding the picture frame. I began to fall again. My back on the floor, the white ceiling directly above. My body felt heavy and my right ear pained with a whooshing sound like that of crashing waves. I made wincing noises, loud enough, I thought, for my family to hear. But I was too far away, almost unseen. I wondered if they were going to save me from a death I knew my body and mind were undergoing. I was scared; and I wanted them to know, to witness, and to come pick me up. I wondered if they would rescue me. No one came. I woke.

Somewhere in my medical archive there is an actual record of me trying to die. It was a failed attempt shortly after the first year of my son's birth. I did not want to die, but I certainly did not want to live, at least not on the terms my family and the medical professionals at the time

set out for me. I recall the general plea and counsel to “live for him,” for my child. What they had failed to understand was that living for him, for the child, was one of the reasons that drove my choice to call it quits in the first place. I did not see myself as the mother my family and community hoped me to become. I did not see myself in my son nor could I really look at him because there was so much psychic and symbolic weight to him and his life. He was a black male child without a father. So ensuring that he had a strong, good mother was even more pressing since he was already missing another important half. Before I could even name myself or talk back to the expectations mandated upon me, I just remember my desire. I felt like Pearl Cleage’s Alice. I wanted to go to school, read every book that interested me, write, and make art. Like Alice, I wanted to create and explore myself, experience pleasure, and fulfillment in life. And importantly, I wanted to live for me, and me alone. I could not speak this. Loneliness, guilt, anger, resentment and hate stacked in me and cemented between my lung cavities. I sensed their thickness every time I went to feed, change, and play with the baby. It was all pretend. And when the night came and the door closed, my body paid the price.

My dream reminds me of my relationship to death in those moments in my birth home with my son, mother, and father. It reminds me how they failed to see how close death and I were and how the intense pressure to raise another human being at the expense of my own self drove me closer to a fugitive desire for joy and freedom. With the lack of structure to verbally express my pain coupled with the inability to materially produce my own desires, I saw no way out. I wanted out of the bodily sensation that felt like a toppled house on my chest. I chose escape, something different. I survived my death, and I eventually chose to leave home. Another cost had to be made for leaving the family. I am an outsider. My dream reflected me at the margins of family life. Though I was physically present and held an important familial gift which

represented the bond that produced an important personal lineage and my own biological life, I recall not wanting to partake in the celebratory occasion nor wanting to sit beside my mother at the center of the dinner table. Though I did not want to be there, I still yearned to be seen, heard, and tended to in my time of need. I was dying and I wanted to be saved. But I was on the outside and distant. Not one sensed me. My dream makes think of the choices I would have needed to make for me to be part of the dream family I perceived. For me to occupy a space at the table, to be an insider, I would have needed to choose to stay home, to be the proper woman-mother expected by my kinfolk. That choice would have meant a life of silence and suffocation. It would have meant forgoing my own growth and healing from the failures and harm my own kin enacted upon me. It would have meant forgoing my hunger to feel good, to explore love and sex with other women. It would have meant not learning to take the space, time, and energy to gain a language that enables me to name and write these words to you now. It would have meant not learning to mother myself. Had I stayed, it would have meant learning and probably failing to care for a boy who lives and breathes today. Had I stayed I would have tried and failed to take up the lessons my mother taught me about surviving. Those lessons meant a suite of self-sacrifices—doing what you have to do for your family’s survival even if it means selling your body when you do not want to, choosing to starve while your child eats, spending your resources and time to develop the talents, confidence, health, and purpose of your child before your own. My dream reflects to me the price of refusing the legacy of women in my family who stayed and endured, those women who labored to see the survival of others. My dream troubles me. If I am not seen or heard because I do not partake in the family as desired, am I of great value to my kin? Would they come to save me at my dying hours or must I put in my time and service to the care of family members as a return for them to care for me? And If I am not part of the family, or a

member at the dinner table, can my kin even see or recognize me and my suffering? And if they cannot, who will?

The space of family in black feminist thought has been theorized as a recuperative realm for black women, men, and children. Theoretically the space of family should keep me safe from the violent idiom and structures of white supremacist capitalist patriarchy which over-determine my body and my being as valueless. My dream showed me otherwise. Politicizing my dream to the larger concerns of the names of the black women and girls written at the beginning of this chapter brings up a larger question. On what terms can black women and girls become recognized and cared for if they are not seen as “deserving,” which is often marked by the reproductive labor done for families and communities? The dream memory that transpired after reading the “Say Her Name” report provokes a strange resonance. Both deal with death—both deal with black women and girls’ intimate struggles for rescue, for recognition, and our ongoing fight to be deemed a valuable human life worth noticing, worth saving not just within an anti-black and anti-woman nation-state, but within our own families and communities.

The #SayHerName campaign and movement intervenes in the dominant discourse and analyses of black death that center the physical deaths of black male bodies at the hands of the state. Spearheaded by Kimberlé Chrenshaw and Andrea Ritchie, the #SayHerName campaign demands that media outlets, policymakers, and communities at home and abroad pay attention to the myriad ways that black women experience police brutality and state violence. The 2015 report not only tells us that black women experience disproportionate rates of death by police shootings and die in much the same ways as black men do, but it also shows us the glaring gaps in media coverage and public outrage when it comes to the premature deaths of black women by the state. The report illustrates whose death *really* matters in the larger public sphere. Some



deaths may instigate a riot while others may not even get a vigil. By centering the individual stories and photographs of black women who have lost their lives to state bullets and of those who have suffered multiple forms of police violence, the report commands advocates to “Fill the void. Lift Your Voice. Say her name” (AAPF 2017). Overall, the #SayHerName movement offers necessary conceptual interventions in how scholars and activists imagine the perpetuation of state violence and broadens the representation of the who that dies and survives ongoing assaults sanctioned by U.S. government agents. By applying a gender inclusive framework that deploys an intersectional analysis of race, class, sexuality, and gender for considering how state violence looks and operates in the lives of black women, the report expands the who, or victim, that experiences death and continuing forms of police brutality, harassment, and sexual abuse. That who is a diverse cadre of black women and girls—trans, cis, gender non-conforming, old, and young. In the end, the brief offers significant revising truths: that black women and girls die by the state, too—that black and women and girls’ lives matter, too—that indeed *all* black lives *should* matter.

Thinking of my dream, my own experience with death, and the names of the black women and girls that preface this chapter, I want to point out the limits of scholars’ and activists’ current articulations of black women’s death and suffering at the hands of the state. Continuing the theoretical shift initiated by the #SayHerName movement, I want to consider how black women and girls might suffer in other ways—more intimate ways related to notions of maternity and domesticity. Though state bullets precipitated the last breaths of many of the black women and girls listed, I do wonder if these black beings were already experiencing a living death that scholars and activists have not quite named yet. The movement makes sure that the bodies of black women and girls count in the measures and analyses of black death. Yet, my inquiries are

prompted by a sense of urgency and anger at the great possibility that the lives and deaths of black women and girls may never count the same as those of black men and boys—both in terms of their value and in their measuring frames. We, black women and girls, will never go down in the annals of history with the same numbers of recorded lynchings nor do we have the same counts of deaths by police shootings or numbers of incarcerations as our black male counterpart. That is because, as the “Say Her Name” briefing recognizes, black women and girls die and suffer in different ways. Much like my dream and my own experience, black women and girls may not die as sensationally, as quickly, or as noticeably. We can be dying while we continue to survive, while we continue to breathe.

In this age of Black Lives Matter, a resurgent movement for black liberation, national conversations on anti-black racism, black death, and police reform have publically circulated. For this chapter, I want to reflect on my dream space and my own experience with death in the space of the family. Particularly, I want to think of how black women and girls’ deaths may be a slow, on-going, and quiet experience related to the heavy loads of work and family, or what Patricia Hill Collins terms, motherwork (Collins 1994). In doing so, I want to intercede in the activist and scholarly conversations of black death and state violence and make space for the deadly costs of maternal sacrifice expected from black women and girls while considering the other ways black women and girls may experience failed rescues not by the state, but by the very people who, indeed, may know our names—our families, our neighbors, and communities. This chapter occurs in two parts. I first reflect on the activism of black mothers who have lost their child to state violence. They are known as the “Mothers of the Movement.” I argue that the strong black mother trope that the “Mothers of the Movement” embody conditions the value of black women in this era of liberation upon the performance of reproductive labor on behalf of

their children and communities. The next section argues that the performance of motherhood itself, or motherwork, can serve as a site of black women's slow death, a kind of death that does not get recorded or sensationalized. These kinds of death happen behind the mask of a strong black mother. I revisit Pearl Cleage's *Hospice* along with the selected essays, "Many Rivers to Cross" and "On Call" written by black poet June Jordan, which reflect on her mother's care work and her suicide. This chapter offers a way of reading that speculates motherhood as a taxing form in the lives of black women. This reading indicts mothering as a possible killing agent to the bodies of black women. In doing so, I contend that black women's demand for humanity must move beyond the modes of recognition offered by familial signifiers of mother and wife and argue that analyses of state violence must move toward more intimate inquiries.

**Whose Time Is It, Really?: The (In)Visibility of Black Women and Girls and the Ubiquity of Strong Mothers in the Age of Black Lives Matter**

It is a sad irony that Alicia Garza, Opal Tometi, and Patrisse Cullors—three black women, two of whom are queer—have continued a historic tradition of black women's activism that centers the liberation of all black beings; yet only the death and suffering of black men in the public sphere continue to dominate the images and analyses of anti-black racism and its legal and social operations within the United States. Co-founder Cullors has expressed that the hashtag #BlackLivesMatter now turned internationally recognized human rights movement, The Movement for Black Lives, was born out of their love for black people upon hearing of the legal acquittal of George Zimmerman, murderer of seventeen year old Trayvon Martin. That love from each of these women was not born out of a narrow understanding of blackness, reports Patrisse Cullors. It "was created from not just a politic of 'blackness,' but it was created from the intersections of blackness, womanness, and queerness" (Wodarczyk 2016). Although several

years have passed since the beginning of the #SayHerName initiative and the published Black Lives Matter herstory online, a narrative in which the founders openly criticize the old guard black nationalist and civil rights models of leadership, black women's and girls' deaths and experiences with police institutions continue to receive less recognition. The founding moment—the killing of an unarmed black teenage boy and the acquittal of his killer—continues to frame the dominant image of the victim and operation of anti-black racism and the judicial system. The most recent death by police encounter is black woman and single mother of four from Seattle, Washington, Charleena Lyles—another name I had to add to the partial and growing list of women and girls lost to police shootings. Three days after the acquittal of officer Jeronimo Yanez, who killed Philando Castile, Lyle called the police due to a suspected burglary. Holding a knife upon their arrival, reports detail that the police feared for their life and instead of subduing Lyle or protecting her from a suspected burglar, police pulled the deadly trigger. As of writing today, I have not read any reports of mass rallies or national outrage. Not many have spoken her name.

While the contemporary United States undergoes a reviving movement for racial justice, scholars and activists must ask “Whose time is it?” really. As black women and girls continue to be unacknowledged individually and en masse, I want to query: Is it (again) the black man's time to shine? In her article, “Whose Time Is It? Gender and Humanism in Contemporary Caribbean Feminist Advocacy,” black feminist Michelle Rowley interrogates the continued utility of liberal humanist frameworks and the analytic of gender for twenty-first century social justice movements in the Caribbean. Rowley's criticism centers on justice movements in the Caribbean, and her questions regarding the utility of humanism and the analytic of gender apply to black subjects in the United States. Rowley recalls the post-independence era spirit in Trinidad and

Tobago, which shares a similar sentiment to the U.S.-based Black Nationalist freedom movements of the late 1960s and early 1970s. Rowley writes that she along with the other “children of the 1970s, spawn of nationalism,” knew and felt the zeitgeist of the age that: “‘black man time had come’: ‘Massa day done’” (4). Described as a time where the black liberation project instigated reclamation of the humanist sign of *Man* to narrowly expand to include the black male, Rowley expresses skepticism at the possibility for black women’s claims to the human category. How can black women be recognized in the liberal humanist framework when heterosexual masculinity overdetermines blackness while white masculinity roots meanings of the ideal human? What conditions must be met for the black female to gain entry into the human category? Must we be the black male’s mate and source of his progeny?

As Rowley queries, do black women and girls, like Fanon recognizes for black masculinity, “...also arrive ‘too late’? Or is that she never arrives at all?” to the human (5). Many of the U.S.-based Black Nationalist liberation movements parallel the Caribbean in Rowley’s account of the regions’ history in that many have privileged the primacy of race and have marginalized black women in theories and visions of racial liberation, dating from the U.S. abolition movement to the twentieth-century civil rights and Black Nationalist struggles. Often caught between the constituencies that lay claim to race (black men) or gender-based injuries (white women), U.S. black women have had to struggle to be recognized as a human-citizen subject before the American state. Like their Caribbean counterparts, black women and girls based in the U.S. face a similar existential and “philosophical problem of absence” as the #SayHerName points out and attempts to remedy (5). Rowley traces the response of Caribbean feminists and women to this absence by noting their construction of a black female subject via historiography and policy advocacy efforts. Rowley, however, criticizes Caribbean feminists’

deployment of a respectable subaltern woman assumed poor, heterosexual, and maternal.

Rowley questions Caribbean feminists' investment in this particular subaltern subject when she writes, "Whether consciously or not...this subaltern subjectivity emerged through a degree of complicity with the black nationalist sentiment of the era. This...was a subaltern that would cohere with rather than disrupt black nationalist discourses" (11). The deployment of this black female subaltern by Caribbean feminists has led to political gains in the region, writes Rowley, but has also produced black feminist and liberationist imaginaries that traffic in, what Butler states, "in the creation of its own 'domain of unthinkable bodies'" (Rowley 14; Butler xi). With the attachment for "black female respectability" the dominant black female subject that can occupy a legitimate space in liberatory discourses is exclusively imagined and "dictated by the trope of the 'strong black woman/m/other'" of the movements (Rowley 11).

Similarly, the "strong black mother" trope operates heavily in the contemporary black liberation movement in the U.S. Though black women and girls' suffering and death have been numerous, the most limelight that black women have received during the Black Lives Matter movement has been as their status as mothers who have lost their child to police violence. Like Caribbean feminist use of the black female subaltern, U.S. black women have arguably been able to access a tenuously legible recognition of humanity through the working-class, maternal, and assumed heterosexual black subject. Black women today are often in the public image as outraged and/or grieving mothers of a slain child. We have seen the public pain of Maria Hamilton, mother of Dontre Hamilton; Lucia McBath, mother of Jordan Davis; Geneva Reed-Veal, mother of Sandra Bland; Sybrina Fulton, mother of Trayvon Martin; Gwen Carr, mother of Eric Garner; Valerie Castile, mother of Philando Castile; and Lezley McSpadden, mother of Michael Brown. These black mothers have come out in public and shared the loss of their child

(usually a son) to state violence through news interviews, book publications, foundation creations, video appearances, and major political campaigns, such as going on stage to rally for presidential candidate Hillary Clinton at the 2016 Democratic National Convention. Collectively, these women have been termed the “Mothers of the Movement” and many of these black women continue a long-standing tradition of politicizing their status of motherhood to promote black life and well-being. These women’s campaigns and tactics are reminiscent of Mamie Elizabeth Till-Mobley, Emmitt Teale’s mother, in the 1950s who decided to publish open casket photos of her son’s mutilated face and her own pain in *Jet* magazine. Their ongoing motherwork—expended emotional and physical labor done on behalf of their child (those dead and living) and for black communities writ-large—is expected and has provided a catalog of powerful images of torn children from pained mothers.

The ubiquity of the black maternal role, however, is a double-edged sword for black women in the ongoing struggle for black liberation. In “Unwidowing: Rachel Jeantel, Black Death, and the “Problem” of Black Intimacy,” Jennifer Nash observes that black women make black death legible to the public by the mourning of the dead black male body. The discourse of mourning black mothers separated from children is rhetorically and visually powerful. Black women as grieving mothers humanize black communities to a white mainstream that places stock in the rhetoric of family and motherhood. The status of black women as mothers serves as a palatable subject and trope from abolitionist campaigns (i.e., the narratives and images from *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* and *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*) to today’s news conferences in which black mothers demand justice and recognition of humanity for all black beings. The black mother figure in the movement offers a modicum of sympathy and temporary recognition of human loss and pain—a legible kind of black pain for middle America to begin to grasp through

the story arc of a mother's loss of child. With etymological roots in the word *matter*, meaning material, it is unfortunate that black women become visible and seem to come to matter mostly through this predominant trope and role while the deaths of black women who are mothers do not prompt the same fervor or impetus to national outrage. The lack of national outcry at the recent death of single mother Charleena Lyles, mother of four who was shot dead while expecting her next child, showcases the discrepancy in media coverage and public furor.

Black women as only maternal mourners is a problem. Black life can be mourned only when understood through liberal identifiers that stroke deeply in colonial frames of mother and child and the death of man. The trope also conditions black women and girls' pain to be only tied to the loss of a loved one, supplanting other sources that contribute to their death and suffering. As such, black women and girls are only understood as mates and mothers—secondary victims. Black women and girls' death and suffering are still not centered; their experience with anti-black racism and sexism still not part of the frames outside the scope of maternal grief. Also, the struggles of their living life still remain unacknowledged. As Diamond Reynolds, girlfriend of Philando Castile, shared with the *Washington Post*, “Nobody was worrying about me before all this, and nobody's going to be fixing it all up now” (Saslow 2016). It remains to be seen if *all* black lives matter given the continued lack of attention directed toward the experiences of black women and girls with state violence. It remains to be seen if all expressions of black life or being will fit in the frames of the human category. As black pain occurs through this dominant symbolic economy, I wonder if the current moment really is a time to make all black life matter. Is it *our* time or is it really a time for another small group of beings who have been deemed less objectionable, less abject to enter the field of play called the human (Rowley 13). Taking cue from the “real” Valerie Castile in her facebook live video, we must ask: Perhaps the “mother’s



club” is a “fucked up” space (Son of Baldwin 2017). The mother’s club, according to Castile, is a club where black women who have lost their child to police violence are told to be respectable and to stay strong and quietly mourn. In addition to quieting the masses to properly protest and not riot, what other impacts does the trope of the strong mother have upon black women and black girls?

As I ask this question, I am thinking of those black girls and women who are not respectable; those who do not want to occupy the movement on these terms; those who feel that liberation is about eradicating police violence and all institutions that demand and constrain black female bodies; and those who articulate their pursuit of liberation away from the collective and rather as one that means an individual course for joy, pleasure and self-growth. The prescription for black girls and women to be strong black mothers and silent means barring expressions of their struggle as a black woman mother in a world that mandates you to be the sole responsible individual of rearing another human being on incredibly limited resources. Told to be quiet, black women and girls have difficulty speaking of how “fucked up” motherhood can be, which lessens our capacity to contend with traditional gender and sexual proscriptions in black communities and lessens the opportunity to imagine different ways of existing and caring for one another. It means not being able to speak of the engulfing pain I experienced as a young single mother in my own family.

Additionally, if the only recognizable and significant role for black women and girls to play in the movement is as the respectable strong black mother, black women and girls are in trouble and will remain so. Tamara Beauboeuf-Lafontant writes that the mythic trope of the strong black woman serves as a “powerful cultural signifier” that links black women to a collective narrative of black women of past, present and future, ranging from Sojourner Truth,

Harriet Tubman, and Fannie Lou Hamer, to the black women in our everyday, intimate lives (2). The narrative of strength tells that black women are enduring survivors of adversity—namely racism and economic exploitation. Beauboeuf-Lafontant writes that strength is the “determining quality of black womanhood” and “forwards a compelling story of perseverance” (1). As a referent for recognizing black women, the positive qualities of “tireless, deeply caring, and seemingly invulnerable” become expectation and self-descriptions (1). Beauboeuf-Lafontant states that strong black women are women who manage “lives of hard, unremunerated, and often low-status work” (1). These “mothers and grandmothers have never—as the story goes—attenuated their feminine commitments to the men and children in their lives. Like women in more privileged and protected circumstances, they too have been responsible and respectable” (1). Beauboeuf-Lafontant notes that the embodiment and expectation of strength is a “virtuous claim” for black women that gives them both status and recognition (2). Though Beauboeuf-Lafontant does not center her study in terms of the expectation of motherhood, the quality of strength delves into the maternal expectation of black women. If mothers are told to remain quiet while enduring, we fail to ascertain the depth of black women’s pain, needs, and desires. As one black woman has said,

I hide my emotions a lot. So I think when people see you doing good from outside, they think you’re a strong person...I think I like the idea when people see me as a strong person, and not a weak person. I don’t know why. It just makes me feel good...but at the same time, I really want them to leave me the hell alone...I don’t want them to ask... (5)

Without hearing black women’s needs and wants to be “left the hell alone” or their struggles with the “fucked up” space of mothering, we, scholars and activists, will continue to fail to see black women’s struggle in intimate realms. Being known as strong and able to care for another

provides many black women a positive sense of self. It is the “good human” that black women have become to be known as. As Beauboeuf-Lafontant writes, black women who are strong mothers are just like more privileged and protected women (read white and middle-class) who have had the benefit of being recognized as a human woman. Like these women who carry out their “feminine commitments to the men and children in their lives,” black women, too, are “responsible and respectable” (1). Yet, the struggle to be responsible and respectable may be the very roads that keep black women from expressing and getting their needs and wants met.

As I consider the troubles with black women and girls’ fight for recognition, I do not want to deny the significance of the #SayHerName campaign and the Mothers of the Black Lives Matter movement in challenging the anti-black racism and sexism in its operations of state violence. I have no intention to disavow these efforts and the labor and ethic of care of all organizations and individuals that work to end systemic racism and sexism in the era of mass incarceration. This chapter, however, points to other ways that black women and girls may experience black death and suffering in the American nation-state, particularly at the site of motherwork. It also explores if there are other ways for Black women and girls to gain recognition—and the black community by extension—as a human subject outside of the designation of the familial signifier of mother.

### **Dying to Be Human: Reframing the Maternal as a Site of Black Women’s Death and Struggle for Black Women’s Liberation**

Violence, popularly understood in terms of physicality, conjures a damaged body—a spectacle of flesh. Much scholarship discusses the actual and social death of African Americans through the debasement and annihilation of blackness as seen in extra-judicial killings of black youth, predominantly black men (Cacho 2012). Feminist theoreticians and activists have moved

toward understanding black women's deaths under the popular frames of structural violence perpetuated by the state. How can we begin theorizing how motherhood, a dynamic between black women and their family and community, as a source of death for black women, and perhaps even, a form of structural violence? Such a question is a treacherous line of inquiry since historic and contemporary violence visits upon the familial and intimate bonds of black women and children. Black feminist and feminist theorists have worked diligently to record this particular form of violence. They have made it legible in scholarship and in activist projects. The narrative of black women's death under the current framework of structural violence is neat. The named enemies—colonialism, enslavement, anti-black racism, racial capitalism, the state—have inflicted wounds upon its hidden victim, the bodies of black women, through multiple methods of exploitation like forced reproduction, rape, coerced sterilization, low wage work, and incarceration (just to name a few). This narrative of violence and black women's death makes sense when you have a fleshed out external enemy and a victim. What if our killing agents are not just the external state? What if our agents of death are internal, intimate, maybe even self-ascribed?

In "Unbearable Blackness," Jared Sexton reflects on a recent scholarly forum on structural violence occurring online at *The Feminist Wire*, a website founded by Hortense Spillers and Tamara Lomax. *The Feminist Wire* is an online space dedicated to critically interpreting and analyzing the "...social and political phenomena that block, negate, or limit the satisfaction of goods or ends that humans, especially the most vulnerable, minimally require for living free of structural violence" and a forum committed to exploring "... alternative frameworks to build a just and equitable society" (164). Sexton considers the following question posed in the forum: "How can we be ethically opposed to some forms of violence while being in

favor of others” (163)? Thinking through contributors’ philosophical and ethical considerations of colonialism, enslavement, immigration, and gender and sexual violence, Sexton asks a very important epistemological question: “how do we *know* anything at all about the forms of violence we oppose and favor, and how might that knowledge or that violence be *represented*?” (164). Sexton’s questions illustrate how theorizations of what we, scholars, term as unjust involves both a political partiality and an epistemological limit. Who or what gets deemed violent or a source of negation towards human freedom demonstrates shifting discursive boundaries of moral/immoral, violent/peaceful, and good/bad not only on the part of society but also on the political commitments and affective attachments of scholars themselves. Sexton’s question suggests an exercise of ethical reflexivity and a critical attunement of how and why we come to deem some violence okay while others impermissible, leading us to ask what sense of ethics and politics drives our terming and contour shaping of that which we consider precarious and death-inducing. Sexton’s inquiry highlights that scholars must have a willingness to go to places or spaces that are often deemed off limits, taboo, or even precious to our ethical and human understanding of life and death. Motherhood, family, and community are often considered precious practices of survival for black life, and many black feminist scholars would much rather not problematize those as death-inducing forces. As such, I would like to ask a related question using Sexton’s formulation: How can we be opposed to some forms of death while being in favor of others and how do we know anything at all about the death we oppose and how do we represent that death? In this series of questions, I want to point to the maternal as a possible space of death for black women and problematize maternal sacrifice as a potential killing agent to black women and girls.

Many black feminist and feminist theorists celebrate the maternal as the point of birthing, sustaining, and loving black life—necessary practices and affects needed—in a world bent on killing black beings or letting them die. I, however, thinking of Sexton’s elaboration of violence as “a structure, a strange form of relation, a dynamic...” want to contextualize the maternal or black women’s practice of mothering children and communities as a taxing relation or dynamic that cost the lives of black women (164). Patricia Hill Collins defines black motherhood as an institution that “...consists of a series of constantly renegotiated relationships that African American women experience with one another, with Black children, with the larger African-American community, and with self” (*Black Feminist Thought* 118). It is also an institution in which black women perform the critical reproductive labor, Collins terms as, motherwork—labor that premises the physical and psychological survival of black women’s biological children and family and also “group survival, empowerment, and identity (1994, 47). In the construction of Collins’ schema of black motherhood, black women’s sacrifice of self is recognized and is identified as the precipitating catalyst for developing her Afrocentric feminist analysis of black women’s mothering, acknowledging that black women often “give up their freedom for the sake of their children [biological and community]” (*Black Feminist Thought* 136). Collins states that black feminists, the daughters of black women who have labored to ensure the survival of black women, men, and children, must “honor our mothers’ sacrifice” (*Black Feminist Thought* 115).

Today, black women and girls are reared to take up the call for maternal sacrifice, and many of us do. Recent black feminist scholarship echoes the voices of those that see maternal duty as primary and if we are lucky matters of self-care may come somewhere after. In hip hop feminist anthology, *Home Girls Make Some Noise*, black wife and mother of two, Tia Smith Cooper, compares her sense of good mothering and vision of the good life with the fictional wife

and mother, Clair Huxtable. Cooper notes that having two children endows her with responsibilities that are greater than herself. Yet, carrying out that responsibility for Cooper means aspiring to be “the good mother”—a being whose “primal concern is what the best interest of the children, not her own needs” and often wishing “for a Xanax” to get some semblance of calm (374). Cooper, like many black women, subscribes to notions of the self-sacrificing maternal figure that black feminists have come to honor. This schema that privileges black women’s reproductive labor for the perpetuation of racial survivance, rarely considers how performing sacrifice and its association with “good mothering” taxes black women’s bodies. In our seamless admissions that good mothers do not make their needs primary and rather others, one must begin to wonder how do black women get the desired and needed care and nourishment they deserve.

Cleage’s Alice and the enunciation of her pain can serve as a starting point to theorizing black women’s relationship to black death and notions of a “good human” for black women. On the outside, Alice was living the desired, respectable life expected of black women—the life of a mother and wife of a liberation movement leader. Alice explains to Jenny, her daughter, her desertion of leaving this role. The scene unfolds:

“Jenny: You left me!

Alice: I did not see my future as the dedicated wife of the charismatic leader, dabbling in a little poetry, being indulged at cultural conferences and urged to read that one about the beautiful brothers and sisters in Soweto, or Watts, or Montgomery, Alabama. I couldn’t just be that. The world is bigger than that. The world inside my head is bigger than that. Even now...I used to watch your father at rallies and in church on Sunday morning, and he’d be so strong and beautiful it was all I could do to sit still and look prim in my pew.

But he was committed to the ‘movement.’ He didn’t have time anymore to lay in bed with me and improvise. I’d been a wife since I was seventeen and here I was almost thirty, with a ten-year old daughter, trying to convince your father to let me publish some love poems! But he couldn’t, or he wouldn’t. The kind of love he had to give me now didn’t allow for that. And I couldn’t do without it. So I left. Not much of a story is it?”

(155)

Alice details how the “human” black woman—dedicated wife and mother—is a limiting role to her sense of self and pleasure. Being the man’s mate did not provide enough pleasure or life for her to live and he denied her freedom to express herself. Becoming a mother at a young age also did not enable Alice to grow in the way she would have liked, Alice felt the need to leave; and that feeling felt dire. After recounting the death of Malcom X to Jenny, Alice speaks of another kind of death that she was experiencing—not one so well known or discussed. In the climax of the play, Jenny and Alice argue about her decision to leave the family. Jenny argues that Alice could have taken her with but Alice admits that she could not stand to look at Jenny (155). Jenny contests that she did not have a choice in the matter, and Alice retorts that:

“Alice: Neither did I, Sister. Neither did I. I’ve spent my life trying to heal a hurt I’m not supposed to have. I got so tired of being trapped inside that tiny little black box. No air, Sister. I couldn’t get any air. Everybody was mad at somebody, or about something. (A beat.) My mother spent her life catching the bus downtown to The Anis Fur Company. Sitting there in that hot little back room sewing purple silk linings in rich white ladies’ sable coats. I went there with her once when I was little. There must have been thirty black women in a room smaller than this one. It was hot and dusty and close. I felt like I was smothering. (A beat.) No air, Sister. No goddam air” (156).



The death of Malcom X, like many black men before and to come, circulated widespread and represents a legible narrative of black death in the public sphere and within black communities. Alice, however, describes her own experience of the sensation of dying in her description of lack of air. “No air, Sister. I couldn’t get any air,” she expresses. The “tiny black box” in Alice’s exposition serves as a motif of death. For Alice, the tiny black box could refer to the domestic life with her husband and child—a life that included a husband who blocked her from publishing love poems and a child who blocked her from writing since she had no time to do so. It could also describe the experience of playing the “exotic other” in France. Alice tells Jenny that she learned that Paris was not different from the West Side of Detroit. Alice, seeking freedom, still had to confront gendered racism in Paris and did not necessarily find the fulfillment she desired. The “tiny black box” describes a web of spaces where racism and sexism confined her choices of freedom as a black woman domestically and internationally. Arguably, Alice was experiencing a kind of slow or surviving kind of death, a denial of not just creativity, but a full sense of self and growth. Alice describes the experience as suffocating, which makes the box sound like a coffin. Importantly, Alice connects the suffocating domesticity to her mother’s work outside of home. Alice’s mother, a laborer in a “little back room” sewing for consumption of white women alongside thirty black women also felt “smothering” to Alice. The parallel sensations connect black women’s domesticity and motherhood to the taxing experiences of wage-labor noted in black women’s history. Significantly, the connection positions black motherhood in the alienating labor experiences outside of home.

Examining Alice’s description of her sense of suffocation invokes a powerful resonance with today’s Black Lives Matter chant “I can’t breathe!”—the final words of black male, Eric Garner. Garner’s death was recorded via cell phone footage. The deathly

chokehold by the NYPD agent circulated internet channels and television news segments and has constituted a significant node in articulating the metaphysical and actual deaths of black beings. “I can’t breathe!” has become a shorthand refrain to understand the undue suffering that black subjects sense and a kind of pain that the law cannot necessarily address (Warren 2017). Alice’s account of suffocating differs. She suffocated and continues to physically live. Her experience with the sensation, however, opens “I can’t breathe!” to experiencing death in the instance of being black, female, and mother in the domestic space. I believe Alice’s sensation describes a potential black female suffering interiority that may not be easy to capture as the physical deaths of unarmed black men. Though different, the sensation of black female suffocation in Alice’s account necessitates a theoretical pause for scholarly and activist thinking on black death, especially when considering the lives of black women. Though Alice survives, it does not mean scholars and activists should overlook the particular and intimate contours of black female suffering. Cleage contends that the suffering of black women is just as important to the plights of black men. Alice shares that she and her husband were both looking for freedom—a way out of the tiny black box. Alice states that her husband only talked about survival and fighting “white folks” while she admitted “defeat” and instead “...always talk[ed] about love” (156). Alice’s words put her struggle for freedom equal to her husband’s, a black man. Doing so puts the slow death of black women as mothers and wives on par with black death perpetuated by public agents. Alice comments on this inequality and lack of attention to black women’s pain and struggle for freedom. Outraged at Jenny for saying that it was a choice without recognizing the constraints of her life and the kind of suffocation experienced, Alice tells:

Alice: Choices? Okay, Sister. Take a look! My parting gift to you is a close-up look at the end result of all those choices you're talking about with such enthusiasm. Choices? Take a good long look at me and save your reaction to this terrible truth for the labor room. You can scream about the injustice of it all in there and nobody will pay you the slightest bit of mind. All the ladies do it. They'll never know that your screaming is different. That yours isn't about the pain of your bones separating to let your daughter out. That yours is about the presence of injustice in the world! They'll never suspect a thing. And it doesn't really matter anyway. In spite of their feigned interest, nobody else really gives a damn if you do your birthing and your living and your dying well, or if you shriek and holler and cling to the nurse's arm. (155)

Though black men and women must both face particular "little black boxes" that society has constructed for each, Cleage highlights the inequity in distribution of care towards black men and women's struggle for freedom. Alice speaks of the uniqueness of black women's screams in labor. Beyond the pain of the separation of bones to push out another being, black women's screams represent the "injustice of the world"—an injustice for Alice that encompasses both the limits of freedom for being black and a woman in the world. While Billie Holiday plays in the background, Alice bears a painful truth to Jenny: nobody cares about black women's lives. No matter if black women exhibit the strength and performance of the "strong black mother" or if they choose not to, black women, at best, may experience "feigned interest" while the rest will not even pay the "slightest bit of mind."

The personal essays of poet June Jordan constitute another point to begin thinking of maternity as a site of black women's death and suffering. Jordan's 1985 essay "On Call" recalls her own mother's "woman's work" (105). Jordan describes her mother's labor as hard work and

service to both herself and father and goes into detail about the washing, cooking, cleaning her mother performed to sustain the family. She pays attention to the impact of this work upon her mother's body. Jordan writes that her labor was "...endless work that left her dark hands swollen and gray from the bleach in the laundry water and cracked from the ceaseless rubbing of the clothes against the rippled surface of the scrub board" (105). Jordan later describes that:

As a child I noticed the sadness of my mother as she sat alone in the kitchen at night, eating dry crackers or drinking a cup of tea. Her woman's work never won permanent victories of any kind. It never enlarged the universe of her imagination or her power to influence what happened beyond the front door of our house. Her woman's work never tickled her to laugh or shout or dance. (105)

Jordan's narrative here offers a limited description of her mother's experience of performing labor and its negative impact upon her body and psyche. I want to speculate further and consider how motherwork may induce more than hand swelling or the witnessed sadness that Jordan details. Consider this performance of labor over time and its accumulation of effect to black mothers' well-being, especially given the discourse of "good" mothering which calls for women to make the needs of others primary. I do not want to attribute premature death and suffering of black women to motherwork alone, but I certainly want to articulate it as a potential taxing or harmful agent along with the effects of racism and capitalism.

I especially want to problematize motherwork since it marks black women's value in black family and community life. In her 1981 essay, "Many Rivers to Cross," Jordan discusses her struggles as a single mother to her then eight-year-old son and her mother's suicide. Jordan opens her essay with the memory of the evening of her mother's suicide. The opening line of her essay reads: "When my mother killed herself, I was looking for work" (153). Jordan writes that

being a recent divorcee was seen as a failure on the part of her neighborhood and family, especially from her father's perspective (155). Though her relationship with her family remained tense, Jordan's mother offered her and her son a space in the family's brownstone, Jordan's childhood home. During this time, Jordan aspired for her mother to spend as much time with her grandchild while she pursued work for the summer. Her mother, however, was experiencing a "...worsening but partially undiagnosed illness" after suffering a stroke at the time (155). Though her mother's physical condition went into decline, Jordan recalls her mother pushing her to find stable work and playing with her son prior to the evening of her overdose. Frantically awakening Jordan at three thirty in the morning, Jordan's father shouted at June that "I think she's dead, but I'm not sure" (157). Jordan, in a state of disbelief and anger that her father could not know the difference between his wife's living and death, replied "You want me to figure out if my mother is dead or alive" (157). She expresses that "I could not believe it; a man married to a woman more than forty years and he can't tell if she's alive or dead and he wakes up his kid and tells her, 'You figure it out'" (157). In spite of her anger, Jordan descended downstairs while her father awaited upstairs for her to determine her mother's death. Jordan entered her mother's room and calls out to her. Jordan witnessed her mother's body. She describes, "At the edge of the cot, my mother was leaning forward, one arm braced to hoist her body up. She was trying to stand up!" (157). Though the body of her mother looked alive, her eyes open and body suspended in action—an attempt to get up—her body was cold and stiff. She was dead. Although close family members deny Jordan's account of her mother's death, Jordan shares that when the police arrived along with her aunt and uncle, each whispered to one another. She recalls one of the police officers stating, "Don't worry about it. We won't say anything" (159). Jordan shares that her aunt took her to the hallway of the house and explained that her mother had committed

suicide. After her death, June remembers the house being full of women from the church dressed to go to communion. Mourning church women talked about June's mother as a good woman. Jordan writes, "Such a good woman she was, they said. She was a good woman, a good woman" (160).

Applying the framework of state violence in reading Jordan's life narrative fails to account for more intimate workings of black women's death and suffering. The suicide of June's mother cannot easily be articulated or explained utilizing frames of state violence or black feminist frames that honor black women's endurance and strength. Utilizing these frames would miss deeper interpersonal practices of black women's death. Even if Jordan's account may not be totally accurate, her recalled memory and interpretation of the event is the significant reading needed to think of the space of the maternal as a site of black women's death. Jordan links her mother's suicide to women's work, a critical point (the essay itself is also utilized) in the theory building for Patricia Hill Collins' understanding of black motherhood. Yet, somehow the suicide of Jordan's mother does not get a mention in Collins' elaborations of black motherhood. Jordan states:

And I thought about the idea of my mother as a good woman and I rejected that, because I don't see why it's a good thing when you give up, or when you cooperate with those who hate you or when you polish and iron and mend and endlessly mollify for the sake of the people who love the way you kill yourself day by day silently. And I think all of this is really about women and work. Certainly this is all about me as a woman and my life work. I mean I am not sure my mother's suicide was something extraordinary. Perhaps most women must deal with a similar inheritance, the legacy of a woman whose death you cannot possibly pinpoint because she died so many, many times and because, even

before she became your mother, the life of that woman was taken; I say it was taken away. (161)

Jordan's discussion of her mother's suicide brings up a number of considerations for scholars to think of black death, in particular black women's death. Jordan's mother, a quintessential good black woman—a dutiful wife and mother—was known to sacrifice her own happiness to maintain family and her sense of duty. Jordan also surmises that her mother felt attached to this kind of labor not just because it was all she knew of surviving but because it also enabled a sense of a good self. Jordan expresses that “I think that she may even have verified the virtue of her life according to the weariness she felt at the close of a day. If she did not feel exhausted, there must be something still not done that she must do” (105). Jordan's mother was a virtuous woman because she served others but it came with the cost of her body. Given that the good mother/woman is one that makes others primary and not self, scholars and activists must wonder about the impact of black women's reproductive labor beyond its necessity to sustain the lives of black men, women, and children. Symbolically, Jordan's mother's last act of bodily performance was one of attempting to stand, a performance many of those closest to her—husband and daughter included—had a hard time discerning as a performance of her vitality or death. The lack of capacity to decipher if June's mother was alive or not tells us that black women are experiencing a death inside homes that no one may really notice because it is so common, so mundane, so expected. This kind of death is tied to motherwork, to the maternal duty of self-sacrifice that black women must perform. Using state violence as a rubric, we miss how the death of black women is encouraged within their own homes and communities as we strive to be good women, valuable humans. Jordan's mother played the role well—she worked hard as a nurse, took care of her husband, children, and grandchild. Yet, her life ended in suicide.

We also miss how caring for others becomes the sole purview of women's domain while men have the freedom to leave. Jordan's former husband left for graduate school to pursue his career. Jordan comments on the inequitable exchange of care duties and responsibilities, writing that her husband got "the divorce that he wanted, and I would have the child. This ordinary settlement is, as millions of women will testify, as absurd as saying, 'I'll give you a call, you handle everything else'" (154).

Reading with the conventional lens of structural violence is still needed and useful. We can see and name the failures of the state in Jordan's life narrative. Jordan struggles to find work that supplies a viable income for herself and child as they live in a state of economic precarity that one could argue is state-sanctioned. Meanwhile, Jordan becomes pregnant and she has little access to a safe, legal abortion. As such, Jordan undergoes three unsuccessful attempted abortions which almost cost her life. The state also fails to enforce the court-mandated monetary obligations to assist Jordan with her and her husband's child. As Jordan shares:

...according to the law, what a father owes to his child is not serious compared to what a man owes to the bank for a car, or a vacation. Hence, as they say, it is extremely regrettable but nonetheless true that the courts cannot garnish a father's salary, nor freeze his account, nor seize his property on behalf of his children, in our society. Apparently this is because a child is not a car or a couch or a boat. (I would suppose this is the very best available definition of the difference between an American child and a car. (154)

Jordan's sardonic criticism of the legal system showcases the state's lack of care for mothers and children. Children are treated as the legal property of parents, and the state does not value all property equally. Jordan states that the law will garnish a man's income for debts of inanimate projects, but not for his own living progeny. Though the state obligates parents to care for their



children, the practice of rearing of children is not men's purview, but rather relegated to mothers like Jordan.

Overall, June Jordan's interpretation of her mother's suicide sets out the task to move beyond honoring maternal sacrifice. Her words echo the need for black feminists to begin thinking of black women's slow death as families and communities equate their bodies with the responsibility to perpetuate black life while denying support for their own well-being. Jordan points to moving beyond the current practice of motherwork. She states:

I cherish the mercy and the grace of women's work. But I know there is new work that we must undertake as well: that new work will make defeat detestable to us. That new women's work will mean we will not die trying to stand up: we will live that way: standing up. (162)

She also writes "And really it was to honor my mother that I did fight with my father, that man who could not tell the living from the dead" (161). Jordan's method of honoring is not only about recording and naming the feats that black women have overcome and continue to endure. She particularly names fighting her father as a way to honor her mother. Black women and girls, as such, must not only fight the state in today's age of movement for liberation, but must really fight the black men and boys in our intimate circles and life and must also fight the patriarchal imposition that their bodies, and only their bodies, do the hard, critical work of caring for other humans and future generations.

Because black women's lives remain undervalued, it is all the more reason to begin thinking of all sites of black women's experiences that drain black women's life-force to near death, or even death itself, even if it means undoing motherhood or rethinking our celebratory orientation of black maternal sacrifice. If black women and girls' lives are to matter, their lives

must be envisioned as a value in and of themselves, not in relation or belonging to another. If we continue to value black women because of the maternal performance which gives them an honorable, virtuous, and prideful status in communities, black women will continue to face the death of playing the honorable human mother/wife subject. As this chapter contends, black women performing maternal sacrifice can relegate them to an unimagined trapping of silence and pain. Thinking of women like Pearl Cleage's Alice, June Jordan, and her mother, I call for black feminists and theorists to move beyond rhetorics of honoring black women's sacrifice by politicizing mothering as a taxing relation for black women to engage.

## 5 CONCLUSION

Mothering, novelist and essayist Marita Golden writes, is an “...act that perhaps more than any other defines the lives of so many women” (229). Contemplating her transformative experience as a single mother to one son, Golden recalls growing up around a collective of women who seemingly embodied “female invincibility”—an imagining that inspired a sense of confidence and independence for Golden to pursue motherhood as a single woman (231). These women in Golden’s childhood were “workers and mothers and sisters and friends and the children of their own mothers” and they resemble the many black women in black life today (231). Golden describes these women as courageous, ensuring that their children were fed, clothed, and sheltered. These women were enduring and laborious, often negotiating rent with landlords, payments with bill collectors, and meetings with school teachers, all while cleaning the vomit from fevered children in the late night. Golden lists a partial litany of the monumental feats that black mothers have and continue to accomplish for the survival of their blood and fictive families—feats that make the heart bleed warm with virtue and the mind wax with the belief in miracles. Golden’s tale, like many in the black feminist theoretical archive, reflect and shape the image and genealogy of black motherhood.

By centering narratives of black Sapphire mothers who admitted defeat, this project attempts to move the black feminist theoretical archive of mothering to a space that considers black women’s ambivalence and refusal toward reproductive labor. Examining tales of black maternal failure and absence diverges from popular accounts of black women’s unwavering courage and commitment to maternal duty. Though stories of strength and sacrifice can be inspiring tales of invincibility for individual women navigating a world bent on the defeat of black life, this thesis demonstrates how maternal sacrifice can come at a great cost to black

women and girls' lives. Accounts of invincible black mothers deny black women and girls the expression and even the existence of an affective interiority that may challenge the status quo of black women's care work as seemingly natural and desired. Black feminists centering maternal sacrifice and survival fail to articulate mothering and domesticity as the very forms that may induce the quiet, "long suffering," and "weariness in the darkness at night" of black women with children and continues to locate care work in the domain of the black female body (231-232). By focusing on 'bad' black maternal subjects, monstrous women who have felt ambivalent and/or left families, this project makes space for black women's voices of displeasure towards maternal imposition in a current publication landscape filled with white women's memoirs on their ambivalent maternal experiences and mainstream opinion pieces that opine their regrets at becoming mothers (Philyaw 2016). In doing so, this thesis unearths potential roadmaps out of the trappings of black maternity by considering the political potential of black maternal ambivalence and absence. Ambivalence can loosen the grip of cultural expectations of sacrifice, and black women taking flight, I contend, can be a necessary route for black female survival and journey towards growth and pleasure.

This thesis ends with a deep reflection on black women's value in this age of black liberation. Accounts of black women's labor of care attest to their necessity within families and communities. Yet, popular stories espousing black women's strength and commitment relegate black women and girls to a contingent space of human value. The nameless black women, like many black women and girls before and to come are not imagined to "...[belong] entirely to themselves" (Golden 231). Not belonging entirely to themselves serve as a barrier to black women's claim to a valuable life. Can black women stake a claim in humanity without any conditions? Must black women be somebody's mother, could be wife, sister, daughter, friend, or

worker to be deemed a life worth saving, a life that should have all the desired privileges and necessities to pursuing human freedom and happiness? In a culture that encourages black women to suffer quietly and freely give, this thesis tasks readers to imagine what has been forbidden for black mothers to speak and/or do amongst and for themselves. In doing so, I want to imagine a black mother's full expression of being. Acknowledging her potential for ambivalence and refusal at the scheme that demands her selfless commitment may very well shake up, destroy, and/or remake the social world. By focusing on the "bad" Sapphire mother, a world not premised on black women's sacrifice just might be possible.

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